

Title: Acts of resistance: a reflexive inquiry into narrative group work with women who have experienced abuse or oppression

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Acts of resistance:

**A reflexive inquiry into narrative group work with women
who have experienced abuse or oppression**

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the degree of:**

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Author's Declaration

I, Leah Karen Salter, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Thesis title: Acts of resistance: A reflexive inquiry into narrative group work with women who have experienced abuse and oppression.

I confirm that:

- This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- Where I have cited the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as indicated.

Signed.....

Date.....

Abstract

This thesis presents a story (in three 'acts') about being and *talking with* women who were part of narrative informed groups that I have previously co-facilitated in two locales. One took place in a Welsh valleys community and the other in a British island community. 'Acts of resistance' (Allan Wade, 1997) speak to social justice, a movement or action, represented in different forms in all three acts. Firstly in Act One, I discuss the co-construction of group work as an intervention into (and a resistance against) the dominant discourses of individualised psychopathology. This is a story of how the shaping of group work (as an act of solidarity) supports a wider discourse of social justice rather than a 'what to include in a group' story.

Inquiring *into* the group experience (by talking with women who were part of these groups) is illustrated in Act Two. As a reflexive inquiry it leans towards narrative inquiry and autoethnography to frame the *talking with* women, a process I have called *conversational inquiry*.

Reflecting on this helped me shape a particular way of engaging with the transcripts from those conversations, a five-step process I have called a *responsive, temporally framed narrative inquiry*, also described in the second act. This brought forth the *themes* (themselves representing acts of resistance) of *deconstructing roles and rules, doing solidarity, co-constructing preferred futures, 'going on' from legacies of abuse, challenging them and us thinking, unpacking power, doing justice, and research as (an act of) resistance*. These themes are explored in Act Three.

The thesis tells *this* story of my conversations with women *and* a reflection on *my* development (movement) towards becoming a practice-based researcher, drawing on theory, personal and practice experiences and what I have learnt through the course of the inquiry. This is demonstrated in the epilogue under the umbrella of *becoming a reflexive researcher*.

It is partly retrospective in that I am reflecting *on* previous practices but it is also ‘of the moment’ as I make connections with my ongoing practice and current cultural/political contexts, keeping stories of resistance within a temporal frame. I am reflecting *on practice* (evidenced in my field notes and in a conversation with my supervisor) and my own *narrative* (perhaps best evidenced in my conversations with my mother). This is all part of the wider methodological story.

The research question I held in mind throughout this was, ‘*how might the exploration of collective narratives inform systemic practice, research and social action; and how might this loop back to personal and social responsibility for the systemic practitioner?*’. Taken from Goldsmith et al. (2010), the questions I asked of my co-researchers were:

- “What were/are we making together?”
- “How were/are we making it?”
- “What were/are we becoming?”
- “How did/do we make better social worlds?”

The inquiry has enabled me to expand my *own* understanding of what it means to be a reflexive practitioner and provides a contribution to the wider systemic and qualitative research communities as an example of practice-based research that offers:

- A first hand, relationally sensitive account of how narrative approaches can support personal and collective transformation.
- Examples of local practice that connect with a wider (global) social justice movement.
- A demonstration of how systemic practices and research can live in recursive relationships with one another.

Key words

Reflexivity, women’s groups, systemic practice, resistance, solidarity, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, collective transformation, social constructionism, social justice

Acknowledgements

There are many people who need to be acknowledged for their participation, support and influence on this collection of writings, the inquiry and my practices. This thesis may be written by me, but it is a multi-voiced affair.

I will start in the most obvious and important place, offering my appreciation and respect for all of those I have been in dialogue with. This includes those who directly (and courageously) chose to contribute to the inquiry; and people I have had conversations with over my years of practice as a psychotherapist and group facilitator, who have influenced my practice in perhaps less explicit but no less powerful ways. I have met and talked with exceptional people; and have worked with some amazing practitioners, many of whom have become trusted colleagues and friends.

I would like to thank and name those who generously gave their time (to talk with me) and blessing (to share our conversations): Anna, Anne, Janey, Julia, Judy, Laura, Linda, Lucy. Extraordinary women, each and every one.

Thanks also to my mother, Jude, for contributing to this research, and for what we have learnt and shared together through the years.

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As a constant influence on my development as a systemic psychotherapist, community practitioner, fledgling researcher and reflexive thinker, I want to acknowledge the significant influence of my clinical supervisor, previous teacher and ongoing conversational partner, Billy Hardy.

Billy's influence is visible throughout this work and in my ever-developing practices; as is the influence of the Family Institute in Wales where I trained and where I continue to connect, collaborate and calibrate. Huge thanks for the support and encouragement offered over the last ten years.

Also recognisable in the thesis will be the influence of John Shotter and Gail Simon who have (at different stages) shaped the doctoral programme I have been part of; and whose academic work is hugely significant in the field of systemic practice and research.

The final acknowledgment is reserved for my most patient partner, my husband, Mat. We met when I was working in a bakery, one of three part-time jobs I had at the time, trying to pay my way through my first degree almost twenty years ago. Little did he (or I) know how our story would develop or how long and windy a path I would find myself on through the academic world that I had just entered. I don't know whether to offer apology or gratitude on this occasion; but on every occasion, love and appreciation.

List of Publications to date

Salter, L. and Hardy, W. (2010) "Crossing the bridge: To dip our toes in the water?" *Context Magazine*, April 2010.

Salter, L., Evans, J. and Hardy, W. (2014a) "Women's wellbeing following childbirth: Voices from Caerphilly". *Community Practitioner*, 87 (8) 21–25.

Salter, L. and Mills, S. (2016) "John Shotter: A day of celebration". *Context Magazine*, December 2016.

Salter, L. and Williams, J. (2014b) "Three year follow-up study of families referred to a family intervention team – what are the outcomes that make a difference?". *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 13 (2) 93-102

Salter, L. (2015) "From victimhood to sisterhood – A practice-based reflexive inquiry into narrative informed group work with women who have experienced sexual abuse". *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling*, 17 (2) 402-417.

Salter, L. (2017a) "Research as resistance and solidarity: 'Spinning transformative yarns' – A narrative inquiry with women going on from abuse and oppression". *Journal of Family Therapy*, 39 (3) 285–494.

Salter, L. (2017b) "Hiraeth: A landscaped story of longing and belonging". *Context Magazine*, June 2017.

Salter, L. (2017c) "From victimhood to sisterhood part II: Exploring the possibilities of transformation and solidarity in qualitative research". *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling*, 19 (1) 73–86.

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'We come into the world moving'

For my mother, Jude

Inspired by and written for 'John Shotter – A Day of Celebration' held at The University of Bedfordshire in October 2016.

Subsequently published in Context magazine (Salter and Mills, 2017)

We come in to the world moving

Head first I dive in to this moment, the first moment?

Gliding through the waters that connect me to you, to life

You are tired, spent, done in

and I am bursting with curiosity, with questions not yet formed

A girl! already becoming a woman, becoming

and still becoming

You look through the world now with eyes no less curious

and I need to look away,

interrupting intimacy,

affirming independence

I learnt to be me through you

I yearned to be me through me

we learnt to go on together, stumbling through,

bound by many more moments

Your steps are slower now and mine faster

Mine take me on

to places you might never see

and we are still becoming

"We come in to the world moving"

I wonder, mother, are we moving

through the world

or are we, mother, the world moving?

I have so many questions yet

Do you still have time to answer?

Shall we sit and talk

or shall we walk, through the world, together?

Prologue

Listening as ‘leaning in’

One of the key motivators for engaging in this doctoral process is that I was struggling to make sense of whether I was actively engaged in doing social justice/doing resistance or actively engaged in keeping women’s stories invisible and silent by listening to, protecting and keeping confidential the stories of women who were entering into the private world of therapy to talk with me about their experiences of abuse. Allan Wade (1997) and Vikki Reynolds (2013; 2014) have inspired me to be curious about women’s everyday acts of resistance in the face of such (privatising) experiences. This, in turn, has helped me to think about my own acts of resistance (on personal and professional levels), and how the practices I have developed over the years may speak to the concept of ‘resistance’, as a political act. Setting the thesis out in “acts” is not just a tokenistic word play. It is intentional as a means to speak to performance/performativity which is connected with (social) action/movement and also is connected with my own story; as a woman who learnt much about ‘becoming’ through studying drama in school, and later at university. I studied psychology and drama in my first degree and consider (in retrospect) that I learnt as much about myself and others via studying drama as I did in psychology. More importantly, though, it is a way to connect the inquiry to wider stories of action. It is connected with how I view the world, my politics, the theories that have influenced me, and the methodology that has shaped this inquiry and then structured this thesis. ‘Acts of resistance’ has become central to how I make sense of that.

Vikki Reynolds speaks of ‘acts of resistance’ and additionally uses the language of ‘leaning in’ (2013) as a radical position as an ‘imperfect ally’ of people(s) who have experienced oppression. Ally work, is rooted in social activism (as is Vikki Reynolds) and this was a helpful frame for me to begin to delve into. For me, this represents a shift from private to public; or an

awakening from ‘feeling’ moved to ‘being’ moved (to action). Sheila McNamee refers to it as ‘radical presence’ (2015) which I equally relate to, a ‘doing of’ presence, rather than ‘being’ present. I have referred to it previously as ‘*doing* withness’ (Salter, 2015), as inspired by John Shotter’s ‘withness *thinking*’ (Shotter, 2006), again moving into a frame of action, beyond a theoretical framework.

Being *in* dialogue, entering *into* conversation with women has been a significant part of this inquiry; initially in the group that we were all part of and latterly in ‘talking again’ through the vehicle of systemic research. Whilst I *am* inquiring into my own practice, this is not in isolation or without the important context of being with other women as we collectively experience a sense of transformation, a solidarity that also speaks to resistance.

Some introductions

As an introductory chapter I hope to offer the reader a starting point from which they can move, with me, through this collection of interconnected writings.

I have made some editorial decisions that are relational, ethical choices. For example, I have chosen to name influences on my practice (people I have referenced) by (mostly) using full names, and (at times) I offer a description of how I relate to them and their work; whether I have seen them, heard them, met them, know them etc. I have done this in order to privilege a relational discourse which feels fundamental to this thesis, and to my inquiry. I have also done it so as not to render them invisible or half visible. I have done the same with my own stories. The women (who are so central to this inquiry) who have contributed by talking with me and having our conversations recorded are *not* named in full. This decision was made with safety in mind, as a compromise that felt necessary to protect anonymity, but was not taken lightly. I am aware that this has the potential to limit the visibility of the very women whose stories I have wanted to highlight. Female colleagues I have worked with have chosen to be identified by their (given)

first names whereas the women who were part of the groups I facilitated have taken up a pseudonym. This decision was/is in line with the recommendations of the ethics committee from the health board I was working within when setting up services for women who have been sexually abused. It is also in line with the proposal I put forward to the Research Graduate School of the University of Bedfordshire, which was passed in 2015. Paying attention to (relational) ethics should be evident throughout this thesis, as it has been fundamental, given the subject matter and my relationship to it, and my relationships to/with the women involved in this inquiry. These relationships are based on respect and solidarity.

As a practice-based inquiry, I have actively chosen to share some stories from practice, which is key to the inquiry, as it moves between past and present practice contexts. I have *also* chosen to share some stories from my *life*. This is for multiple reasons. Firstly, it positions me alongside the women I have been talking with who have also courageously shared their own stories. Secondly, it fits with the research methods I have chosen to use and it also fits with the current emphasis (not just in a research frame) on telling stories as an act of solidarity (see further references to the #MeToo campaign for expansion on this as a contemporary cultural context marker). Thirdly, it loops me back to practice. How I practice as a psychotherapist is not just based on theory, on research; it is based on practice experience *and* it has connections with personal experience.

Something about me

As I have progressed in this project I have become more and more interested in autoethnography, as a framework to ‘reveal myself to myself’ in a research context (Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, 2017), not just as a reflexive practitioner. The quote below encapsulates what I have come to think about in terms of what I give and share of myself within this inquiry and within my wider practices. As we move through this thesis, it hopefully becomes (and

remains) evident that I have worked to demonstrate the movement between these differing states of being.

“As autoethnographers ... writers integrate emotional, spiritual, and moral parts of themselves with the intellectual and analytical in order to hold on to the personal connection to their experience that inspired them to do autoethnography in the first place.” (Ellis and Bochner, 2017, p. 1 in Pensoneau-Conway, Adams and Bolen, 2017).

Involving and showing myself in this way through the inquiry has fitted from an ethical perspective; in my commitment to reflexivity and transparency and has reminded me of my responsibility to myself/my own stories as well as the responsibility I have for others who have shared their stories with me. As a woman talking with other women who have been sensitive to experiences of invisibility and lack of voice, this seems more than relevant; it is fundamental.

Throughout this inquiry and in the papers I have had published throughout this time (Salter, 2015; Salter, 2017a; Salter 2017b) I have exposed *some* personal stories about myself, my family of origin and about my practices. I am very much aware that these stories only represent a small part of who I think I am, and I could have chosen to make visible a million and one other stories (including those from practice) but these are the ones that revealed themselves to me as I engaged in talking, reading, writing and inquiring.

My mother joined me in this regard and I am grateful for her courage in making that choice. I was raised by my mother, who was 33 when she had her daughter, and was a more ‘mature’ mother in comparison with other families we knew at that time. However, when we look back we both recognise that as a small family unit of three (my brother being the third, three years my senior, and a constant, steadfast figure in my life), we were *all* pretty much making it up (growing up) as we went along. As many families do, I guess. On balance I think we did a pretty good job.

We lived in an industrial town in south Wales, and though built around the docks, the town was/is not a very culturally diverse one; and like most of the other residents, we were a white working family. I hesitate to say working *class* as our socio-economic status fluctuated. My mother and father separated when I was eight (though the tensions in their relationship were visible a very long time before that) and the separation was dragged out until they divorced when I was thirteen. Their divorce brought change for us as a family financially, as well as structurally and emotionally, as we moved from a spacious home to a more compact space. My father also lost his job following this and my mother began working in a local department store. Prior to that my mother had not worked and my father was far more financially buoyant. This same year was also the year my grandfather died; after which I realised how much support he had offered my mother and what a massive loss that was to her, and subsequently to us as a family. We had some bumpy years ahead; coinciding with me reaching my teenage years, which added to the 'bumpiness'.

I have highlighted a few events through my childhood which have been relevant to the 'themes' of this inquiry; one of which entered the public domain at about the same time as my family was going through the transition outlined above. A male teacher who had taught me (and some of my friends) to play the violin was arrested for sexually abusing children – boys and girls. I had previously made my mother aware of my discomfort when I had gone to lessons, and though I did not have the courage to tell her the details of that, she thankfully responded by backing my decision to stop having the lessons. I tried to talk with my friends about it and warn them, but I think that many children were in less fortunate a position than myself and what happened to them was far more serious, and more prolonged. He was prosecuted at the age of 76, and spent some of the last years of his life in prison.

This was *one* of the significant stories of my childhood and young adulthood that probably, in

hindsight, influenced me (in some way) in my 'journey' towards becoming a systemic psychotherapist. It is probably also no surprise that I ended up working with families, given my family of origin experiences. However, if I were highlighting other themes in this thesis, I might not have so readily drawn on this particular story. It is not ever present in my thinking and is not distressing but it *is* an *uncomfortable* memory to access.

There are other stories that emerged and appear throughout this collection of writings which seemed relevant to highlight, and so they are dispersed amongst the thesis. I have drawn also on stories of practice that are, of course, still in development as I continue to live and practice reflexively. These are also, of course, entirely anonymised.

Professionally, my experience of working with families started in 2001 when I began working in a voluntary sector run family centre in a significantly disadvantaged area of Wales, in a Welsh mining community. (Though previously I had been a children's nanny in Wales and in Australia, so maybe it is fair to say that I began working with families when I left school in 1993). Working in a family centre setting, however, marked my first 'graduate' job, and in this context I worked with children, young people and their families who had been impacted by abuse, neglect, loss, social deprivation and disadvantage. I learnt much about the impact of poverty, injustice and oppression in this setting. I stayed there for eight years, completing my family therapy training whilst acting as manager for the project between 2007 and 2009. I moved on from here to work as a parent therapist for the same voluntary sector organisation and this confirmed my interest in working with adults who have experienced abuse and trauma and who have been diagnosed with having a mental health 'condition'. This was my first 'fully qualified' post, and I was lucky enough to work within a team that had a clear direction and a systemic ethos. It was an exciting and productive time for me as a practitioner where I was involved in innovative work and experimenting with writing about my practice (Salter and Hardy, 2010; Salter, Evans and Hardy,

2014; Salter and Williams, 2014). I moved from here into the health sector and have since then been working for/within statutory mental health services; for four years in an island community and since 2016, back in Wales, in small post-industrial and semi-rural communities.

Throughout my career (and life) I have been preoccupied with ‘power’ and what I might language as ‘voice’. When I worked with children and families I recall my supervisor at the time supporting my application for the qualifying level of training in family therapy by saying that I was a passionate advocate for the ‘voice of little people’ (meaning children – my client group at the time). At the time, this is what I thought I was passionate about, working with children. What I have since realised is that my passion is for challenging acts of oppression and injustice that silence *anyone*, but particularly those with less access to power. Of course, I am also now working with the adults who *were* once the ‘vulnerable’ and abused children who I had previously worked with. It is the continuation of abuse and oppression that keeps me ‘active’ in challenging injustice. My interest in narrative practices and telling stories grew from this and has given me a means to challenge injustice from within therapy practice and beyond. This thesis encapsulates that movement to ‘beyond’. It is also an illustration of a commitment to reflexivity that goes beyond my professional life (my psychotherapy practice). Reflection on and in practice (and beyond) should be evident throughout this writing. Reflecting on my practice was aided by a recorded conversation with my supervisor, Billy; and reflecting on my life stories was given more meaning following conversations with my mother; which are also included in the thesis. Both of these additional conversations became important aspects of the overall methodology.

Ken Plummer (1995) asks, “...*which kinds of narratives work to empower people and which degrade, control and dominate?*” He suggests that there are many stories (evident in research) that may “...*pathologise voices, or turn them into victims with little control over their lives*”; whereas other stories may “*sense human agency and survival, giving the voice a power to*

transform and empower". (Ken Plummer, 1995, p. 29, in Camille Warrington, 2013).

The stories presented in *this* thesis, are offered as stories that speak to transformation and solidarity. They also indicate a reclamation of power through resisting the dominant narratives of pathology or victimhood. It was always intended to be a 'witness' experience – talking *with* women about their stories that go beyond these limiting definitions, to reclaim stories of resourcefulness. It was *not* intended to be an evaluation of the group content, of my role as a facilitator or the efficacy of group work provision, though this is touched upon throughout; with the main emphasis on the setting up of the group presented in Act One. It was also not intended to demonstrate (per se) the specific outcomes for the women involved; though this is also evident. This form of evaluation was done during and following the group and the results *did* demonstrate that women had experienced positive change in relation to mental health, personal and relational wellbeing. Whilst this was encouraging and interesting, what I was/am more interested in, in this inquiry, was/is what women were telling me about their experience of solidarity and transformation; which resonated deeply with my own experiences. I had felt close to, connected with, inspired by and full of respect for the women involved in this inquiry – colleagues *and* group members equally. I felt moved *by* what I had been part of and was noticing movement *in* me, in the way I talked with people, shared my own stories, challenged oppressive practices and any kind of 'aboutness' talk. Now this, for me, was worthy of further exploration, which this thesis (hopefully) demonstrates. This interest led me to talk with eight women, over eight conversations (some group, some one-to-one, discussed in Act Two) which then resulted in eight themes being inquired into (Act Three).

Introducing the key 'players' – my conversational partners

Anna, Anne, Janey, Julia, Judy, Laura, Linda and Lucy.

Anna, Anne, Laura and Linda were all involved in the island community group for women who

have experienced sexual abuse. In terms of the group intervention, Anne and Laura were part of the first group that Lucy and I facilitated and Linda and Anna were part of the second group. Anne, Linda and Laura had also known me as a 'therapist', and Anne speaks about this in our conversation. There have been three groups since the first one began, two I was part of and one involved a new facilitator, Emma. Lucy was part of all of them. In terms of the inquiry, Anne took part in an in-depth dialogue whereas Laura, Linda and Anna were involved in a group dialogue, in the conversational inquiry. Linda, Anne and Laura have also featured in papers I have had published, with their generous and thoughtful consent.

Emma and Lucy are now facilitating the groups for women who have been sexually abused *outside* of the context of mental health services, which is something we all hoped for from the beginning, but took a long time to move forward. Lucy has maintained an energy to do that, and is committed to be part of a story of social justice within the community she lives and practices, as is Emma. I consider both of them allies as well as friends and colleagues.

Anne, Laura and Linda, with support from Lucy, are also working hard at setting up a more informal context for women to be able to talk with other women who have a shared experience of abuse. These are exciting developments which I continue to feel connected with.

Janey offered us (Lucy and I) consultation through the setting up and delivery of the first group. Janey had previously developed a similar project in the same locality some ten years before, alongside her colleagues at the time. In this thesis, Janey's story goes beyond her role as our supervisor as she shares with me her personal and professional experiences of going to the edges of practice that move into the territory of 'whistle blowing'. These conversations have been inspirational and as such feature heavily.

Julia and I have worked together (in Wales) for so long that I keep miscounting the years. We have worked together in a family centre, in a parental mental health project, in writing and

teaching projects; but most notably as co-therapists and co-facilitators of community groups for women. We have the kind of relationship where we finish each other's sentences and where a tiny facial gesture can result in the other one saying 'I was thinking that too'. It is the kind of familiarity and comfort that we try not to take for granted but name and honour it wherever possible, usually with humour.

Judy was part of a wellbeing group that Julia and I facilitated many years ago (about seven or eight, I think) which was part of a community intervention project in Wales, reaching out to parents (mothers) who might otherwise have been feeling isolated in a community that has significant markers of deprivation. The group was set up to support the wellbeing of parents, many of whom were living with identified mental health challenges and also supporting children with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties. Judy maybe speaks more from her position as a woman who lives in a community that is oppressed rather than sharing direct stories of oppression and abuse in this inquiry. I have kept in touch with Judy over the years and have been privileged to hear about how she has developed her own career as a counsellor and supervisor, now practicing in the same community I used to work within.

Practice context

My practice has been historically based in the valleys area of south Wales (in the voluntary sector) and more recently (2012–2016) in a British island community (in a statutory health service). Since 2016, I have been based back in Wales, in the NHS. In all of these contexts I have been employed as a systemic psychotherapist but have also written, developed and co-facilitated group work programmes for women 'going on' after experiences of abuse and oppression, in each locale, taking different shapes and speaking 'into and out of' different contexts. My current role is not the main focus of my inquiry but as I write about my past experiences I have no doubt that this is influencing my current practices – my ongoing

'becoming' – and this is an important part of the story.

Thesis structure

The thesis itself, which tells its own story, is set out in three *acts* (of resistance) sandwiched between a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue aims to set the stage, introduce the key players and hopefully provides context to this practice-based inquiry, centralising both aspects of practice and research. Act One sets out to describe what I was engaged in as a developer and facilitator of groups with women, offering a rationale to why/how those groups were set up and why this might lead on to inquiring into this particular aspect of my practice. It also offers some theory and rationale to the practice element of the inquiry – the group work with women. Act Two describes the stage of inquiry where I was talking with the women who were part of those groups. I have called this the *conversational inquiry* stage. These conversations, which I then transcribed, took place in the specific practice locations, where I had previously worked. I am deliberately not naming the exact locations so as to be sensitive to the confidentiality of the women involved; though I also recognise that this is flawed. Not only might it still be entirely possible to find this out, it also creates dilemmas in how I pay attention to context without naming locations. My defence in respect of this fair critique would be that I have done the best I can to both protect the women involved in this inquiry, changing names and details where appropriate and not naming specific locations, but also (hopefully) not entirely losing the emphasis on context (geographical and otherwise). This is explored later in the 'review'.

I have focused on group work as a key aspect of my practice as I was (am) interested in how much these groups moved *me* at the time (and have continued to move me since the groups have ended) as well as noticing how other women appear to have experienced a sense of transformation from being part of the group. I have always been drawn to working in groups as I have valued the opportunity to connect with others in a more community focused and less

clinical context. My sense is that this brings significant difference and I am interested in how that has shaped my thinking and shaped other areas of my practice; influencing how I am as a psychotherapist when I meet with families, individuals and groups. I am also interested in how the communities in which we practice and the social, cultural and political discourse (currently and historically) are part of the recursive relationship between context and practice.

Act Three of the thesis focuses on the themes that emerged from the conversations through the first stage of a five-step inquiry that I have named a *'responsive, temporally framed narrative inquiry'*. The themes that emerged from that process were *deconstructing roles and rules, doing solidarity, co-constructing preferred futures, 'going on' from legacies of abuse, challenging them and us thinking, unpacking power, doing justice and (doing) research as an act of resistance*. They are attended to in distinct chapters (the last one is expanded on in the epilogue). The themes *themselves* can be seen as unique 'acts of resistance'. They also offer a framework to the influences on my practices that are constantly in development, in flow.

I have been asked on many occasions through this process whether my inquiry is *about* the conversations with women, whether that *is* the inquiry, or whether the structure of the inquiry was/is just a way to explore particular themes. In other words, is the focus of the research the conversation or the writing? The *content* or the *process*? I think it is both. The conversations and what emerged from those conversations are both absolutely central to this inquiry *and* 'just' a way to explore practice and themes such as power, social justice and gender, which are all relevant in how I make sense of myself and my practices. Conversation/dialogue is central, both in *what* I do, and in how I make *sense* of what I do. Every conversation I have with people who come to therapy, with people I am in a supervisory dialogue with, every time I meet with *my* supervisor, something changes, something moves within me and moves me on. This is also how I make sense of why people come to talk with me, and come back again, to continue the

conversation. For me, conversation represents movement, a reflexivity. It also has, in a very tangible way, a 'de-privatising' effect, which is the beginnings of challenging social injustices, including the silencing and subjugation of groups who have experienced oppression. In this thesis I am highlighting the particular context of sexual abuse and oppression of women.

However, there are many other injustices that, I would argue, require the same de-subjugating, de-privatising response in order to move from the private context of therapy into a more public arena.

The epilogue of this thesis then represents this movement. It offers an invitation to think about becoming a researcher as a further 'act of resistance'; demonstrating the movement (and tensions) involved in shifting domains from private to public, personal to political, social care to academia and from therapist to researcher, positioning myself alongside others on the threshold of change.

Kieran Vivien-Byrne and Billy Hardy (2014) have written about the possibilities of 'change and transformation' *at* the 'threshold' or *beyond* the 'pales' of restraining discourses and perceived limitations in roles as educators and therapists and the learning that comes from going to the threshold of your own reflexivity. I think the 'change' that Hardy and Vivien-Byrne are talking about here is one that could be associated with 'second order change'; change beyond personal behaviour change (Watzlawick et al., 1974). This notion of change is associated with patterns of being that are in relationship with the wider community, and with cultural and social discourses. When I am referring to change in this writing, I am coming from a similar perspective, though I personally connect more easily with the language of transformation. Whilst the language of change and 'theories of change' have an important relationship with psychotherapy (and the relationship between family therapy and 'second order' change is one that has enabled systemic theory to demonstrate difference or uniqueness), I notice that 'transformation' sits more

comfortably for me. I think this is because I can personally relate to it, based on my own experiences throughout the work I have been involved in that is represented in this inquiry, which I have described as transformative. Imelda McCarthy and Gail Simon (2016) have similarly promoted the potential for systemic psychotherapy practice as a practice of *transformation* and I both relate with this (from my own experience) and hear it as aspirational, as something that can move my practices on.

Unique contributions

When I first put forward the rationale for this thesis, I had in mind (and suggested) the following research question.

“How might the exploration of collective narratives inform systemic practice, research and social action; and how might this loop back to personal and social responsibility for the systemic practitioner?”

I suggested that the aim for the thesis was to ‘relationally connect research and practice in a way that speaks to a development of practice as social action’. I was also interested in how experiences of change may go beyond an individual description of difference and might be a story of *collective* transformation. The below quote from Laurel Richardson has provided a touchstone throughout, connecting with the edge of practice that I am describing as social justice.

“By emotionally binding together people who have had the same experiences, whether in touch with each other or not, the collective story overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life... (offering) the possibility of social transformation.” (Laurel Richardson 1990, p. 26).

Holding these ideas in mind and emphasising the possibility for (collective) transformation through solidarity, not just in group work but in 'listening again' to women through the process of research, has been integral.

I was also listening to myself, paying attention to my inner dialogue and how I was being moved by the conversations/ interactions/ meaning making processes I was part of. It was this noticing that led me to engage more in different kinds of writing, such as the poetry that is highlighted throughout the thesis. This, for me, felt like an honouring of thoughts/ feelings/ experiences that were more emotionally resonant. The anger I felt at what had happened to my colleague Janey; the feelings of loss I was experiencing as I moved towards "becoming" an academic; the pain I felt at remembering the devastation of abuse. All of these were and are relevant to research that speaks to social justice because the anger, loss and pain are associated with experiences of *injustice*.

This also led to me to have a conversation with my mother which took place in person, over the phone and via letter. It is the content of her letters that has been included. This was an unplanned venture that led to unexpected outcomes for me (positively) but I now feel that it was as much a part of the overall methodology as anything else was. I am not suggesting that everyone who engages in this kind of research should invite their parents to participate; but I am also not suggesting that it should be "off limits". It fits within a reflexive inquiry that has borrowed heavily from autoethnography and it fits for a practitioner-researcher whose main job is talking with families and working with people to understand connections between current life experience and family of origin stories.

As a story of *complexity*, the thesis is purposefully not presented in *too* linear a way; though any academic writing is of course bound (to a certain extent) by the expectations of the university, the wider academic community and any potential reader. So it is set out in chapters and, like

most stories, has a beginning, middle and end (set out in three acts) and I try to offer the reader some orientation to each section so that they can join me within a spirit of inquiry. It does not set out to respond to specific research questions or provide unequivocal evidence that provides 'a way' to do research or 'a way' to do practice with peoples who have experienced oppression, or even 'a way' to facilitate groups with women. It is instead an intricate presentation of a multifaceted and interconnected collection of 'responses' to the complexity of stories that are connected with abuse, oppression and social injustice. It is relational and polyvocal, and as Sheila McNamee has suggested, it is relationally and temporally situated (1994). Within this relational (and temporal) frame I consider that I have offered unique contributions to the interconnected fields of systemic practice and inquiry in suggesting that:

- Responsive and relationally sensitive group work with women who have experienced abuse and oppression offers a de-privatising alternative to individualised 'treatment' that can contribute to a discourse of psychopathology.
- Group work (that frames intervention as 'solidarity') can be personally and collectively transformative.
- Narrative practices offer opportunities for women to talk about experiences of abuse in a way that is collectively transformative and contributes to resistance and justice doing.
- Reflexivity offers a robust and ethical framework for practice and inquiry.
- Conversational inquiry offers multiple opportunities for reflection for the systemic practitioner.
- Talking 'again' and talking 'with' provides multiple opportunities for conversational partners to engage in transformative storytelling.

- 'Binding' people together through research offers opportunity for preferred futures to emerge and evolve.
- Systemic research invites the possibility for making sense of and developing (local and global) reflexive practices (Gail Simon, 2012).
- Insider research provides rich opportunities for understanding and developing recursive practices.

These contributions are presented in the research through a collection of pieces of writing that focus on particular themes, themes that have emerged from the conversations I was having; and writings about the *process* of inquiry. They are also reflected upon in the review and summary to this thesis, written between 2015 and 2018. The actual process of *writing* about these conversations and writing about the way I went about *doing* the inquiry became almost as central to the inquiry as the conversational stage; both stages offering a rich learning and practice development opportunity. However, reflecting *on* the process (as I moved back into my everyday practices as a psychotherapist and group facilitator) reminded me how important local practices are, and how they (in themselves) help to form and shape a wider narrative of resistance and of doing justice. I noticed and highlighted how narrative approaches and storytelling are important in this, in connecting with the wider discourse of social justice.

The criteria I used to provide context to the inquiry was taken from the PDSP (Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice) handbook (University of Bedfordshire). The content of which is included in the appendices. I was also influenced by Sarah J. Tracy's (2010) proposed guidelines for quality research, referencing 'eight 'big-tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research'. The eight criteria she proposes are, (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigour, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. I consider that this inquiry can speak to (and build a meaningful relationship with) each one of

these criteria; and I agree with Sarah Tracy, when she says that *'researcher reflexivity... serves as an important means toward sincerity for research'* (Tracy, 2010, p.849). Sincerity (I might choose to use the language of transparency) has been key not only to this inquiry but to my own development as a practice-based researcher; and as such I would invite the reader to hold this in mind as we 'go on' together.

It might also be helpful to hold in mind the structure to the story. The prologue offers an introduction to the stage, the scenes and players; and also offers a methodological and conceptual framework. The first act then moves the story on to pay attention to the doing of group work as an act of resistance; offering some rationale and description to the process of group work with women. In doing so, it also offers a backdrop to why I might want to inquire into this area of my practice. Act Two, does just that, talking through the method and process of the conversational inquiry stage (the 'talking again' with women who were part of the groups); and what would traditionally be called an analysis of that material, what I have called a 'responsive, temporally framed narrative inquiry' – a five-step process of engagement with the transcripts. The third act then pays attention to the eight themes that emerged from that process and uses those as headings and as ways to springboard into further inquiring into these important themes (or aspects of practice). The epilogue then tells the story of 'becoming' a researcher, paying attention to the ethical dilemmas embedded into that movement. I use this language in tribute to John Shotter's (2016) ideas of 'becoming' that I have been influenced over the last few years. For me, 'becoming' speaks to responsiveness, to movement and to fluidity. We are always becoming, never fully formed. Ideas, the meanings we place on things, concepts and writings are equally fluid. This thesis is no different; it is 'still becoming' right up until it is finally handed over, and beyond; as readers connect with it and hopefully take it forward, help it 'go on'. Therefore, even the summary (the last chapter) is not *really* 'the last word', even if that is how it is billed.

In this final chapter, I offer a summary and review of the inquiry as a whole, noting flaws, failings, contributions and outcomes; as well as recommendations for future research, future 'becomings'. The presentation of the thesis aims to lead the reader through the different stages, named as 'acts' as they speak to movement, action and (acts of) resistance. Act One is (of course) the next part (the next movement) of this story, and where we are going next.

Act One

Group work as (an act of) resistance

Setting up the groups that are part of this inquiry was very much part of a story of resistance. The wellbeing groups in Wales (from when I worked in the voluntary sector) were designed to offer a purposeful and distinct difference to the groups that were being offered locally by statutory services which seemed to focus on single definitions of identity. Depression management, anxiety management, living with bipolar, these were the kinds of definitions being offered. Most of the women we were working with at that time were describing something different, broader than this – challenges of living was how we had thought of it. For example, the challenges of family life, the challenges of taking care of yourself when resources are spread thinly, the challenges of negotiating social services and health service systems. These were but a few. This, of course, shifts the relationship. The person ‘entering’ the system is no longer seen as the problem, the problem is to do with the *navigation* of the new territory without knowing the way or the rules. This offers a new story, which was intentional. The group was not set up to be time limited but to offer an ongoing space for women to connect with others and to reconnect with their own stories of resourcefulness. We covered a lot of territory in this group which included relaxation techniques, mindfulness, mindful parenting, creativity and wellbeing, food/sleep and wellbeing – all of which were themes that the group asked for, alongside many other things. However, the consistent element was that we were there for each other, week after week, supporting each other, whatever was brought into the ‘space’.

The group I was part of setting up in the *island* community had a similar purpose but was developed this time from *within* a statutory health provision and so it needed to ‘survive’ within that context. I think this meant that we worked even harder to offer a service that was not drowned by diagnoses. Though all the women who attended were already involved in

secondary care mental health services, we worked the edge of not letting this relationship dominate; instead privileging the relationships between the women and each other and us and the women. We purposefully avoided any talk of diagnosis within the referral criteria and focused instead on the relational definition of experiences of abuse. It took a while for some of our colleagues to connect with this, but 'word of mouth' from those who attended the first group soon began to penetrate the impenetrable discourse of pathology; and it began to be seen as a useful intervention. This group was a 12-week programme that contained some previously considered content but also was responsive to the ideas/needs/contributions of the women in the group.

Some rationale

Both groups were inspired by narrative practices (explored later) and an expansion of the concepts of solidarity and 'being with' in the wake of abuse and oppression. Some of the available literature that we reviewed in advance indicated (as Sayin et al., 2013 do) that such an intervention (what they call '*mental health treatment*') needs to be planned '*...with careful consideration of both local cultural differences and universal human fundamentals*'. They also advocated for the use of group interventions in this context as a '*... preferable treatment for these women, because it especially helps to reduce feelings of stigma, isolation and shame*'. (Sayin, Candansayar and Welkin, 2013, p. 8).

Whilst I agree with the sentiment of this, I lose connection with/through the language used, that speaks to an 'aboutness' position. I also lose connection with the medicalised language that suggests that '*these*' women coming together (as I would see it, to have meaningful connection and conversation) should be labelled as 'treatment'.

I might agree with Sayin et al. (2013) that planning a group for women to come together requires much thought and attention to detail; that it needs to be culturally sensitive and it needs

to tackle head-on the issues of stigma, shame and isolation. I also feel that it needs to be responsive in a moment-to-moment way and actively engaged in resistance at a local and global level. In this way, addressing stigma, shame and isolation is explicit; it becomes an act of resistance *and* of solidarity. It is named and given space *explicitly* and not just implicit in the making of a group. Yes, feelings of isolation may decrease by meeting with others, by connection and cohesion. Yes, issues of stigma are reduced by the universality of the group. And yes, issues of shame potentially lessen by speaking out and connecting; but I believe the role of the facilitator is central to not only bring people together but to position *themselves* firmly as an agent of social *justice*, not an agent of social *control*. This, for me, is where the 'power' of the systemically informed group experience lies, in the ability to look outside the processes *within* the group; to position the group in *relation* to wider discourses of power and oppression; to not just *be* anti-oppressive but to *do*/challenge anti-oppression.

It has been, and continues to be, a *personal* challenge for me to work and live within a culture that sees the legacy of an experience such as sexual abuse as an *illness* within an individual that somehow needs to be treated. I understand that this may not be the *intended* message of this quote, but it troubles me that this language dominates our workplaces and communities. To me, it seems that both health and social care services are holding onto an *idea* that issues as complex and multi-faceted as sexual abuse can be treated by directing (potentially) suppressive and oppressive 'treatment' towards the people who have experienced it. Not only (in my mind) is this 'topsy turvy' thinking that holds the 'wrong' people accountable but it is also a huge resource issue. Given that most statistics agree that one in five, maybe as many as one in four, women will have experienced sexual abuse, we are talking about vast numbers in the population who we see as all needing individual 'treatment'. If sexual abuse were a disease then, this would be an epidemic, as would rape, as would intimate partner violence.

It feels important to point out that whilst I *am* talking about the impact of sexual abuse, violence and oppressive practices on *women* in this inquiry (because this is what I have been involved in) I am not (in any way) suggesting that men do not experience abuse, violence and oppression. I am also not suggesting that men are always the perpetrators, and women the 'victims'. Indeed, a group work programme for men who have been sexually abused has been developed on the island where I previously worked, following the 'success' of the group work programme for women, *and* because of perceived need. I have also worked with men who have been sexually abused as children and men who have been abused (physically and emotionally) by their female partners as well as working with same-sex couples where violence has been perpetrated by women. This is perhaps an obvious statement to make, but one that seems important to note. In my experience, people who have experienced abuse or violence from a woman often come to therapy with the assumption that they will not be believed as the bias (which they might have already experienced) is that women do *not* abuse. These experiences then can become as invisible (by being an 'exception' to pre-conceived '*norms*') as women's experience of abuse (by men) which become invisible by being normalised. Additionally, both positions have the potential to blame the people who have experienced abuse as the 'problem to be treated', rather than seeing the culture of abuse as the issue that needs addressing.

Baumann et al. (2000) make this very point, suggesting that an environment "... *that creates individuals who all-too-easily perceive themselves to be isolated from society and culture will have two prominent effects. First, it will produce unhappiness. Second, it will lead many people to believe that their misery is a product of their own inadequacy.*" (Baumann, 2000 in Nightingale and Cromby, 2001, p.119).

This thinking continues to perpetuate the idea that 'people are the problems' rather than seeing 'problems as the problems' (White and Epston, 1990) seeing the 'problem' of abuse and

oppression as situated *within* someone who we then label as a 'victim' or a 'patient'. Instead of an individual health perspective then, the group interventions we set up purposefully to position themselves as a collective resistance to oppression. I would suggest that any group that intervenes in issues such as these has a responsibility to do the same, to develop socially just activities that aim to bring about change in a system and society that *is* oppressive. This conversation speaks to such an aim.

Leah *So even, even in that early phase then, this idea of what are we, what are we making together? We weren't just making a group, we were making a statement?*

Lucy *Yeah.*

Leah *You know, creating the group was an intervention....into (kind of) society if you like, that actually we recognise that this is a problem.*

Lucy *Yeah, yeah, and I think, looking back... I think that was important... you know it makes me **angry** (emphasised) that people don't know that these things happen, and it was like, you know... if we can support people to kind of move forward from their experiences and kind of develop within themselves then maybe they can get to a point where they feel strong enough to kind of stand up to the higher powers and actually get out there and say, you know...*

Leah *Right, so it was kind of part clinical, part political?*

Janey *Yes.*

I think this excerpt illustrates the nature of the systemically and politically informed group that we were all part of co-constructing, as both an act of resistance and an act of solidarity. There is not a vast amount of research that focuses on group work in this area; but much of it offers some kind of commentary on the power of 'coming together'.

Wolfsdorf and Zlotnick (2001) reviewed a group work programme for women with experience of childhood sexual abuse who were also assessed as experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. The purpose of the group, they report, was to regulate 'affect' through 'skill acquisition', 'symptom reduction' and 'stabilisation'. Their study suggests that the core components of the group that utilised mindfulness, crisis planning and challenging 'distorted' thinking was compatible with what could be seen as efficacy in increasing wellbeing. Though I would not describe the group I was part of using the same language, and would suggest that the content was much more fluid and group-led than indicated in this study, much of both the *content* and the *intent* has significant overlap; and the outcome could also be viewed similarly. We drew on mindfulness techniques to help women to feel grounded and relaxed in the group and we introduced psychological skills in managing stress and distress; this made up some of the content. However, we spent *most* time creating a space where common language and ideas could be deconstructed and where new and innovative narratives could be constructed. This was done through exercises such as making collective pictures about the construction of gender and gendered 'norms', marking out common experiences through the use of string as a 'web of connectivity', using a values continuum to think about societal understanding of abuse and oppression and marking our own values in relation to that, sharing stories of abuse and stories of overcoming abuse, thinking about ourselves in relation to womanhood and gendered identity, and exploring past and future stories of intimacy.

In the evaluation of these groups the feedback suggested that women *did* indeed experience increased wellbeing, a decrease in what might be viewed as negative symptoms and (in addition) they consistently offered feedback suggesting that simply being in the group, with other women with similar experiences, was extremely helpful *for* them and important *to* them. The argument here is that *coming together* (with the facilitator(s) centralising that concept) supports a sense of solidarity that, in turn, breaks down 'them and us' boundaries that serve to

divide. It speaks to a reclamation of power, beyond what can be 'taught' within the *content* of a group.

For example, Anne notes that it, "... *taught us that we could talk about things without getting super upset or without getting traumatised... It helps to discuss things openly and also helped us see each other's points of views*".

Again, this could be said to fit with other studies that focus on the group experience as a central aspect. In an early study (1973) where 100 people in a psychiatric hospital were asked their views on short-term group therapy, their feedback suggested that being 'part of' a group offered hope, group cohesiveness, altruism, and universality (Maxmen, 1973).

Conversely, and at a much later stage, Fritch and Linch (2008) suggest that despite frequent use of group interventions as a response to interpersonal trauma, there is little available research highlighting the efficacy of group intervention in this area of practice. I do not disagree with this statement but I consider that there are multiple factors at play. It is not necessarily 'the truth' that group interventions are ineffective in response to interpersonal trauma; it is (I would suggest) more likely that (in an individualised model of medical care and treatment) that these interventions are not encouraged, supported or researched as much. They may become invisible because they are too messy to measure or become manualised to minimise the messiness. The more *powerful* discourse dominates. The quote below perhaps illustrates why this is so vital to challenge, and why group work that (from the beginning) emphasises the 'power of the collective' can play a significant part in a story of change, beyond diagnostic criteria.

"The NHS is being geared to contract out services and Payment by Results will be based on the provision of time-limited treatments given to people whose presenting problems have been categorised by a computer programme into a particular Care Cluster. Rather than be reduced to

a diagnosis, abused people in the future will be reduced to a number. People who have awful experiences of having had things done to them will enter services and have things done to them as decreed by NHS Trusts and private company managers following national guidelines that rarely mention words such as trauma, abuse or neglect.” (Holmes, G. 2012, p.130).

This is ‘true’ of my experience also. It *feels* like the narrative of individual pathology is so entrenched (so powerful) in the systems in which we work that it takes courage to challenge its dominance. In a large scale review of group work literature, Burlingame et al. (2002) suggests that much of that literature focuses *exclusively* on the relationship between members of the group and the group itself; rather than on multi-dimensional relationships such as member to member and member to facilitator and (not even getting a mention) facilitator to group. When we consider what Gelo and Salvatore (who view psychotherapy as an open, complex system) say – that *“everything taking place within this (therapeutic) environment which may be thought to stimulate the change of the psychotherapeutic system is a change agent of that system”* (Gelo and Salvatore, 2016, p.381) – then it seems surprising that these multi-dimensional relationships are not given more attention. In my experience, these multi-dimensional relationships are constantly in *relational flow* in a group such as this. They are all part of a story of complexity; and maybe this is why they are neglected, because they are (too) hard to ‘pin down’, to capture.

This reminds me of an email I received from Janey who had been reading some of my recent writing. She offered these encouraging reflections.

“It strikes me that, although you sometimes say you worry about being 'at sea' and being muddled, actually what your writing does is avoid the pitfalls of dualism...Society IS a muddle and probably, if we ever think we have got it sussed then we are oversimplifying things! I feel like I am often surrounded by fog (which can double as a comfort blanket) and your work

enables the fog to lift for a bit and in places, so that I can see things more clearly and make more sense of my world. In that way, it is transformative. Whilst I totally get all the reasons why we are tempted to compartmentalise complex issues and turn away from difficulty, your writing does the opposite. To me, it engenders an unusual mix of comfort and uncomfortableness! On balance this is a good thing!"

I include this not to flatter myself but to remind me why I am engaged in this process and how it connects to practice. Paying *attention* to complexity in groups, getting into the 'muddle' is a political act (of resistance) that purposefully notes and *celebrates* complexity. Writing about it is another way to challenge reductionist thinking and practice which can leave people feeling unheard, un-understood, and uncared for. Janey notes that this can bring discomfort as well as comfort and I am reminded that being part of the groups I have been part of has *often* brought discomfort, mostly in relation to the connection it has with my own stories of powerlessness. I am sometimes left wondering if anything has changed and what I can do to be part of a story of transformation. Writing this and sharing personal stories then, though not without discomfort, helps me feel part of a 'movement'. This connects me again with a call to (social) action; one of the themes that we can explore together in this next chapter.

Mountain Whispers

I hear the call, it's airborne

Blown on the breeze softly

Like a dandelion clock

Signaling its arrival imperceptibly

How I am moved to respond

To connect, touch, taste this call

So we may be in unity

In this moment, I wait to fall

Head over heels

Ice under snow

Part of earth's movement

How we, together, grow

And yet I sense a distance

Within what we think we should know

And then in that moment

I lose touch with the flow

Act Two

Talking again as (an act of) resistance

Setting the scene – a conceptual framework

Some influences on my approach (or my ways of being) can be described as relational, reflexive, postmodern, feminist, social constructionist, autoethnographic and narrative; all of which (for me) are in relationship and connect with the wider theme of social justice. Of course, the inquiry is also connected with and based on my practice as a systemic psychotherapist, so it is maybe pertinent to (at least temporarily) define the term 'systemic'.

Talking systems

I have often been asked, as I am sure many systemic practitioners have, 'what does systemic mean?' Colleagues, friends and family ask this and I often stumble to offer a definition that I can feel satisfied with. It just feels so complex. I usually fall back on Bateson's (1972) emphasis on feedback and 'recursivity' as a way to *try* to answer that question, communicating a sense of 'connection' – beyond the connection that develops in a therapeutic relationship-connection with the systems which we operate within, the communities in which we live and work, the culture and society which the family and the therapist are 'shaped' by, a connection with the environment; and the list could go on. So this idea of connection, and then the recursive nature of being in and *noticing* these connections, is more likely to emerge rather than a pure definition of cybernetics or systems theory; which, of course, have been hugely influential. This is because when I am with families I am not necessarily thinking about their interpersonal relationships as systems, but I *am* thinking about the challenges they are facing as complex and relational ones that affect people who live *within* systems.

Lynn Hoffman (in McNamee and Gergen, 1992) highlights that for many family therapists who

moved from thinking about cybernetics and feedback loops towards thinking about '*intersubjective loops of dialogue*' were doing so within a frame of hermeneutics and moving within what has become known as the 'interpretative turn'. Though I do not describe myself as purely 'dialogical' in my practice (as I do not think that this is how people would describe my practice if they observed it), I do value the contribution of dialogism and, most importantly, the value of dialogue. This, for me, is a significant thread that connects the important contributions of systems thinking and how I practice – or more accurately how I relate with people. In a way, the main thread *is* connection, connection found in conversation, in dialogue, in being with.

Theory and practice

Inga-Britt Krause (2012) offers a thorough and interesting review of Bateson's contribution to systemic practice and the intersection between anthropology and psychotherapy; as well as the tensions between theory and practice that evolved from this. She advocates for a '*comprehensive reflexivity*' on the part of the systemic practitioner. She suggests that systemic therapists (and researchers) who uses their own selves to learn about and make sense of themselves, others and the world are presented with '*difficult and thorny problems*' which can bring challenges as well as opportunities. Peter Rober (2012) in the foreword to the same publication, suggests that Kraus positions reflexivity as a means to go *beyond* the narrative/postmodernist paradigm and beyond the idea of 'not knowing', into a new way of knowing, with a strong emphasis on local 'knowledge' that is brought forth through self-reflexivity. Rober highlights, within this, the challenge for the practitioner who might be carrying with them the '*burden of a historical debt of our colonial pasts*', and be drawn to present themselves as 'opposite' to coloniser. The challenge, he suggests, is in finding a way to pay attention to the complexity and confusion of cultural sensitivities beyond an apologetic position in relation to our own 'cultural situatedness'. Rober suggests, as Daphne Patai (1994) does, that

one way to do this is by getting out of our comfort zones and dealing with the ‘stuff’ that causes *discomfort*, within a commitment to reflexivity. I agree and as a White Welsh/British woman, I find myself in the position of relating (intergenerationally) to both positions of oppressor and oppressed, colonised and coloniser. These perhaps represent the thresholds of cultural identity that continue to perturb.

I consider that throughout this inquiry I have gone to my *own* edges (‘thresholds’) of comfort within my commitment to reflexivity and that this has been provocative, painful and productive. I revisit this towards the end of the thesis, extending the ideas put forward here by Peter Rober who touches on an extremely important backdrop to how many of us find ourselves working to be *anti*-oppressive whilst grappling with our own cultural histories of *being* oppressors. In conversation with Julia, we were talking about why ‘class matters’ (and to me, it *does* matter) in practice and research contexts and noticed that whilst it might be *recognised* (by some) as ‘mattering’, it is rarely (in our experience) discussed during, before or after therapy sessions, or in relation to community developments. We wondered if this was because there is discomfort (even shame) attached to naming class for ourselves and for others. For me, it seems like there may be shame attached to naming a lower class status than what is perceived as ‘the norm’ (in the world of academia, for example), and there may be also shame attached in naming a higher class status that is connected with so many stories of privilege and power, especially when engaging in research (again, I explore this more later). So a researcher naming their class (as we can see) is already personally, culturally and politically loaded. Is it something we choose to identify with? Do we name it for ourselves? Or is it assigned? These are but some of the questions we may ask in relation to this. Why that may matter is another question and one that is connected with both personal and political stories of justice and injustice.

This is why I have been so drawn to Vikki Reynolds’ work as she does not just pay *attention* to

this context, she offers *solutions* for how we move forward as ‘imperfect allies’. Allying imperfectly *with* people who have experienced injustice, oppression and abuse enables me to do so authentically, naming and paying attention to my own experiences of oppression and abuse without being paralysed with guilt or shame about the experiences I have *not* had. As a Welsh, white, ‘working class’ (of sorts/depending on how that is defined), heterosexual woman I have some experiences of oppression that are associated with my gender, cultural background and class; but I have no direct experience of being persecuted for my colour, heritage, sexuality, beliefs or abilities. This does not mean though that I cannot helpfully position myself alongside people who have had those experiences. Deconstructing my own biases and assumptions is part of this commitment. This is how (and why) I consider social constructionism as a *concept* to be helpful within a context of *action*- in the ‘doing’ of therapy, of group work and of ‘research’.

A social constructionist leaning

However, in the same way as I grapple with trying to describe systemic practice, I do the same with social constructionism. It might *seem* ‘straightforward’ but I am often swamped by it, almost intimidated by it. I get lost in its complexity. I am encouraged by finding myself in good company.

“The foundational idea of social construction seems simple enough, but it is also profound. Everything we consider real is socially constructed. Or, more dramatically, nothing is real unless people agree that it is.” (Gergen and Gergen, 2008, p.10).

Ken and Mary Gergen seem (to me) to have made it their aim to ‘spread the word’ of social constructionism and also to offer multiple ways for readers to access, process and make sense of the fundamental principles underlying the collection of concepts/models/ways of thinking/making sense of the world that could come under the umbrella of social constructionism. I have read a number of papers, articles and books by Mary and Ken Gergen

and have listened to them speak, on different occasions. The way that they describe it as both 'simple' *and* 'profound' is perhaps the most concise way that I could describe my own relationship to these ideas, ideas that *show* themselves in my practice. At times it seems 'obvious', 'straightforward'. How could anyone (I often wonder) argue *against* the idea that everything is constructed and connected? And yet, the more I think I 'understand' or am able to put words to my own sense-making process in relation to social construction, the more I realise that I am in the territory of complexity. The more I describe myself as someone who leans towards this way of thinking, the more I hear myself saying things that are arguably contrary to the basic premise that everything *is* constructed. I notice, particularly in this thesis, that I am naming myself definitively as 'a woman', 'a feminist' as if these words describe a reality, a truth that defines myself and my identity. 'What is this notion of self?', I then hear myself ask, if not a constructed concept, in relation with a particular culture, time, place, and set of ideas that prevail in a (western) society that is dominated by psychological ideas of the 'individual self'.

From (within) *this* context of social constructionism, Cronen and Pearce (1999) developed a significant model of meaning making (CMM – coordinated management of meaning) that connects (communication and social constructionist) theory with practice. Within this model, paying attention to the *context* of communication within an understanding of a hierarchy of meaning has been a central premise – paying attention to the context that each person is speaking out of and in to – but so too has the notion of story formation and storytelling. Stories told and stories lived is how Cronen and Pearce have language it, encapsulated in the quote below.

"The comparison of 'stories told' and 'lived' evokes a recognition of the two sides of human experience. We write of the stars with hands genetically shaped for grasping a branch or crude tools, we dream of universal peace with minds that are affected by the enzymes secreted by our

livers, our souls soar with aesthetic ecstasy while our bodies struggle against a maturational cycle that makes hair gray, skin wrinkle and tendons tear instead of stretch." (W. Barnett Pearce, 1994, pp. 63–64 quoted in Cronen and Pearce, 1999, p. 30).

Cronen and Pearce tell us that whilst they are in an intimate relationship with one another the difference between 'stories told and stories lived' is distinguishable. One is limited only by imagination, they tell us, whilst the other lives within relationship. The first is far reaching, almost uncontainable whereas the other is far more 'grounded'.

For me, this inquiry, represents stories told *and* stories lived, my stories, the stories of women that I have been talking with, *and* the stories that shape our culture, our society, the fabric of our lives and the connections with our universe. Some chapters centralise the latter more clearly than others. I love the way that this is described by Vernon E. Cronen and W. Barnett Pearce below; it is so clear and distinct, and yet poetic and beautiful.

"Conversations are a fluid result of the interpenetrations of these two worlds. They include both the dream-stuff of the stories we tell and the physical-stuff of the stories we live. Neither is complete without the other; neither is reducible to the other." (Cronen and Pearce, 1999, p.30).

The stories captured in *this* thesis represent such a movement between these two domains of 'dream stuff' and 'physical stuff'; and my own story represents a movement from therapist to therapist-researcher (discussed more fully in later chapters). It also illustrates a commitment to go to the 'uncomfortable' places that are part of my 'story lived' *and* to delve into more creative spaces with poetry and prose that connects more with 'stories told'. This is shown, I think, not just in *what*, but in *how* I was moved to write and to tell stories.

The movement *between* personal stories, stories that are taken directly from the conversations I have been having with women who have experienced abuse/oppression, stories from practice

and stories from different cultural contexts, also speaks to the movement between 'local and global reflexivity' (Gail Simon, 2012). This, too, is part of the overall methodology.

An example of local reflexivity in action may be a reflection on how my own stories of oppression and/or abuse relate with other women's stories of abuse and/or oppression. In a practice context this might be demonstrated by a 'bringing forth' of the therapist's inner dialogue and how that translates into the conversation that takes place during therapy. In a research context this might be demonstrated (within the frame of autoethnography) by the researcher's field notes being made transparent, whereas global reflexivity may connect more with wider political and cultural contexts. However, I agree with Gail Simon (2012) who suggests that reflexivity in practice and in research is always a relational 'activity' and as such is *always* in relationship to wider contexts, as the model of CMM (Cronen and Pearce, 1999) also helpfully reminds me. Therefore, whilst I might make some distinctions between local and global practices and local and global (relational) reflexivity (Burnham, 1992), I do not view them as separate entities. They are in relationship, in flow.

Moving towards methodology

This research (as a whole) could quite firmly be called 'insider research' or 'practice-based research'; and could also be described as a 'narrative inquiry', but I have chosen to name it as a 'reflexive inquiry' as this feels like the most accurate description to summarise the *whole* process, paying attention to *how* I am as a therapist-researcher, not just *what* I am doing. At the level of 'approach' it is a way of being (in therapy and research) that *I think* I embody (Burnham, 1992).

I have also utilised autoethnography throughout; which perhaps becomes more evident as we move through the thesis. This is all within a wider qualitative research framework which includes the use of field notes, autobiographical accounts, journal entries, letters, conversational text,

family and cultural stories, poetry etc. as components of a research which is situated within, and attuned to, practice. It asserts that both practices of therapy and research are potentially transformative for all those involved. It is, again, a relational response, but it is (also) political, seeking to perturb injustice and oppression.

Feminist research

For me, feminism (both historically and currently) offers a platform for paying attention to gendered discourses, for unpacking power relations and challenging 'them and us' kind of thinking, so it links with many of the themes that have emerged from this inquiry (discussed in Act Two). It has helped me think, therefore, about my relationships with the women involved in this inquiry, and with my own stories of injustice. It has also helped me to think about and begin to define my relationship to *research*.

I have learnt, through this developing relationship, that research has the possibility to connect people across different cultures and communities to create new social worlds and new 'communities of practice', which speaks to research as 'joint enterprise' (Wenger, 1998) or what Shotter (2006) might call 'joint action'.

As such, I have been influenced by Laurel Richardson (1990), who suggests, as Patti Lather (2007) does, that research can and should go beyond a desire to impartially convey 'a truth' or 'truths' but should also be concerned with social justice, providing a 'sociological community' from which 'shared consciousness' can develop and where social action on the part of the collective can create the conditions for collective transformation.

Sheila McNamee (1994) has spoken of research as 'another form of talk', and I agree, but it is also more than that. It is a 'social intervention' as McNamee (1994) has also suggested. This has been one of the cornerstones of this research and is inextricably linked with my own

experiences, my own (gendered) stories of injustice and my own frustrations with hearing the stories of women who have experienced the double abuse of not having their experience validated at the level of relationship, community or society; and (for me) not knowing how to respond to that beyond the local context of the therapeutic relationship. The research itself then has been an 'intervention', at both this local (practice) level but also as a contribution to more global conversations that propel the feminist position to continue to challenge power and injustice.

In a very current and present (2018) connection with the global context, the #MeToo campaign has gathered massive momentum, in a way that might not have been predicted or ever before seemed possible. This campaign has been given new life by actress, Alyssa Milano, who encouraged Twitter followers to speak up about their own stories of sexual assault or discrimination, in solidarity with other women. Milano was following in the footsteps of fellow actress and activist, Tarana Burke, who started the campaign over ten years ago in solidarity with 'women of colour' who had experienced sexual violence. These are worthy causes indeed.

Georgina Lawton of the Guardian newspaper (October, 2017) said that the power of witnessing female solidarity in this way was 'empowering and goosepimple-inducing' but she also suggests that it is important that the conversation keeps going and goes beyond the (somewhat removed) film industry into 'real' life. This has started to happen; and I have had the same 'goose pimple' moments of daring to believe that this campaign is set to make a real difference to the lives of women, everywhere, at a *global* level. It has extraordinary potential for women everywhere to stand in solidarity with each other and 'call out' the undermining, oppressive and often overtly abusive behaviours that are often barely noticed.

Just like this campaign, my paying attention to my own experiences (maybe my own 'me too' act of solidarity) does not just make this inquiry more *authentic*, and (I would argue) more *reliable*

as a result; it is also part of a wider political *movement*, highlighting local experiences and practices that connect with global (feminist) issues. It has a de-silencing, de-subjugating effect *and* it moves the conversation (and subsequently the discourse) on from thinking about women who have experienced abuse as 'victims'. The language of victimhood is suggestive of previous vulnerability then made more vulnerable by what women have experienced; the broken, damaged and distressed stereotypes of vulnerability. This language can too readily invoke difference rather than sameness which can 'other' people as 'not like me'.

Now (following the #MeToo campaign) we are talking about the one in four women who have experienced some form of sexual abuse or assault, *not* because of their innate vulnerability, not because *they* were broken but because society, based on outdated adversarial and hierarchical power structures, *is* broken. We are also talking about the women who probably do not feature in the statistics around sexual abuse, the *countless* millions of women who have experienced some form of sexual harassment, the insidious 'subtle' forms of maintaining an oppressive, patriarchal culture within industry and within public service. As I am writing now, the American film and media industry has been shaken by this and the government in the UK is in chaos amidst emerging allegations of sexual harassment. Narratives of responsibility and accountability are emerging. This is also being talked about in the context of therapy, with female therapists starting to talk about their experiences and how this relates to how they practice. I think this is a good thing. As we talk about this we bust the myth (and begin to disqualify the story) of individualised pathology, of victimhood, bringing into focus instead a wider social story. *Talking* about this perturbs the systems that continue to abuse and silence. Talking *again*, by engaging in research, by using social media, by writing, or taking these conversations into wider, public debate has additional impact and this is exactly why I have taken this step into the world of 'research'. It is also why I do the job that I do.

Coming back to practice: Reflexivity in the domain of practice

Elsa Jones (1991) highlights both the pitfalls and potential benefits of female therapists who have experienced abuse working with (what she has called) 'survivors' of sexual abuse. I choose *not* to use the language of 'survivorhood' (though I recognise the potential power of this language for many). For me, it has the potential to 'disqualify' the countless (often invisible) women (as discussed above) who have experienced some form of sexual abuse/ trauma/ assault/ injustice who do not feel that they 'survived' but who know it happened nonetheless. I think we all need to stand together as people who have had these experiences without discounting or trivialising those experiences that were not (legally) seen as *serious* enough to warrant prosecution or the notion of 'survival'. Perhaps this is why I have been more drawn to the language of 'going on' (Wittgenstein, 1953) as (for me) it bypasses the *judgement* on the type of experience, how it is 'graded', or how it is 'made sense' of.

I do, however, relate with what Elsa Jones notes as the potential for pitfalls and/or positive outcomes. I have (in the past) experienced feelings of both paralysis *and* liberation in therapeutic encounters – times when I feel that my personal experiences (not just in relation to abuse) have held me back/frozen me; and times when I have felt that my experiences have enabled me to forge connections and co-construct meaning in ways that speak to social justice. As Elsa Jones suggests we should not, as therapists '*wish to remain untouched by the change that our clients are exploring*' and I agree. Vikki Reynolds (2010) has helped me to see this collaboration as an act of 'solidarity' that is the beginning of a story of (collective) transformation, one that I consider I am not observing, but am part of, am attuned to/with. It is not, in those situations, necessary for the therapist to disclose personal stories but the connection (in my experience) is felt by both; and the role of the (reflexive) therapist is to make use of that felt connection for the benefit of the person you are with. This is my definition of reflexivity in the

domain of practice, reflecting on, and responding to, these kinds of felt connections and the intersection between personal and professional stories. It is also part of the commitment to social justice, making use of the attention paid to that intersection (of personal to professional) for the purpose of challenging oppression.

Reflective practices have a longstanding tradition in fields such as education, health, social work, counselling and psychotherapy. Reflecting on (and in) practice and paying attention to the self of the therapist (as highlighted above) was absolutely embedded into the training I have undertaken. Gibbs' (1988) model of the reflective cycle is one (of many) that will be familiar to people who have trained in one or more of the above fields; and reflective practice (in general) is often referenced as a key aspect of 'good practice' in those areas of practice. Schon's (1983) model of 'reflection in action' demonstrates the difference between reflecting *on* action (an after the fact process) and reflection *in* action, which advocates for an 'in the moment' reflexivity. This perhaps signals a move from thinking about reflective practices as retrospective analysis of something that has happened to more of a 'prospective' reflexivity of something that is happening (Edge, 2011).

Reflexivity in the domain of research

In research terms, Mariam Attia and Julian Edge (2017) suggest that a reflexive inquiry should concern itself with both *prospective* and *retrospective* reflexivity. The former, they suggest, is concerned with the effect of the '*whole-person-researcher on the research*', whereas the latter is concerned with the effect of the '*research on the researcher*'. This fits, for me, with the emphasis placed on recursivity in my initial research question and also fits with how the inquiry (and my role within it) has developed. In addition, I agree with Finlay (2002) who highlights the role of reflexivity as part of a paradigm shift in postmodern research that is part of a move to (not only pay attention to but to) actively '*erode the researcher's privileged position*'. I (once

again) also agree with Gail Simon (2012) who suggests that the language of 'self' reflexivity is a confusing one for systemic practitioners as reflexivity is always relational (Burnham, 1992). This (I suggest) is the same for practice *and* research contexts.

However, as Vivien Burr (1995) notes, the distinctions between the differing roles of reflexivity are rarely made visible in practice and in writing *about* practice; and while "...*reflexivity is a term which is widely used in social constructionist writing . . . (it) is not necessarily used in the same way by different writers*" (p. 160). Burr (1995) suggests that the most common usage of reflexivity is researchers "*analyzing their own writing, reflexively discussing how their own accounts have been constructed*" (p. 160). This is perhaps different from how I am using the term 'reflexivity', which is more *practice* based, that my writing is part of, but only one part of. I am more interested in how my writing (and the conversations I have been part of) represents a *development* in ideas, thinking and practices; a development in how I engage in social justice and the recursivity represented in that relationship. Lorraine Nencel (2013) suggests that reflexivity on the part of the researcher is '*an essential component for unsettling hierarchies*' in feminist research, where, she says, "*...the text becomes a co-constructed space that reveals the interaction between the researcher's assumptions and positionality and the voices, stories and experiences of the research subjects. Consequently, the ethnographic text..... is the outcome of the embodied, lived experience of fieldwork.*" (Nencel, 2013, p.76).

Practice-based research

To me, this speaks to the position of the reflexive researcher to be non-expert, and to be involved in witness rather than aboutness ways of talking, writing, inquiring (Shotter, 2006). If *postmodern*, (feminist) reflexive research challenges this notion of researcher as 'expert' then, whilst also accepting 'the inevitability of bias' in research (Van Heutgen, 2004) then *insider* reflexive research, I propose, helps to further make bias visible (and potentially useful) by

recognising the inevitability of bias in practice as well as in research. Patti Lather highlights the 'inevitability of failure' of an inquiry that is concerned with research as 'praxis' and has written of feminist research as a 'doubled science', inextricably connected with experiences of loss and being lost (which I explore further in the epilogue).

It also, for me though, speaks to the dual role of an insider researcher, where the researcher is engaged in researching and critiquing her own practice *and* critiquing the methods with which she inquires into/uses in her practice. Within such a 'minefield' of complexity, getting lost, or at least losing my way at times, does feel inevitable. In naming failure though, Lather goes further to suggest that those researchers who are informed by feminism and social justice who are looking at the '*intersection of research, theory, and politics*' are bound to fail in their intent to '*produce different knowledge, and to produce knowledge differently*' (Lather, 2007).

"Always already swept up in language games that constantly undo themselves, we are all a little lost in finding our way into ethnographic practices that open to the irreducible heterogeneity of the other as we face the problems of doing feminist research in this historical time." (Lather, 2007, p. 149).

Embracing complexity

Already, I feel the potential for losing my way amongst the complexity and interplay of theory, practice and ideology. I can feel the potential for this journey to be liberating for me as a practitioner (on a *local* level) and also something that speaks to 'liberation praxis' (where action and reflection are in relationship) on a *global* level (Taiwo Afuape 2015). However, I can also see the potential for frustration, tension, discomfort and failure. I can appreciate then how I could lose anyone I take with me on this journey, the reader included. Therefore, in order to offer some kind of definition that can orientate the reader to this influence on my practice, I have considered that this may be best demonstrated by 'showing' the practices I am engaged in (as

best I can) by making that visible through the collection of writings contained within this thesis.

I have attempted, therefore, to ground each chapter in examples *from* practice (both retrospective and current) whilst also paying attention to relevant context and theory; embracing complexity, rather than aiming for any sense of certainty. In making *this* choice I also made the decision (early on) to not (too definitively) separate theory from practice, as I do not believe that they exist in different worlds, but live in relationship. I have therefore not dedicated space for a 'literature review'; and though I have separated out the 'doing' of the 'conversational inquiry' from the wider 'reflexive inquiry' (for the benefit of the reader), I have also made connections in these chapters with theory and with examples from practice. I do this so as not to decontextualise the relevant (and important) *theory* or leave me feeling 'disembodied' in my *practice*, constrained by any false claim to 'certainty'. Objectivity and researcher expertise have long been questioned (and challenged) in the field of qualitative research (e.g. Fine, 1993; 2006) and I am not aiming for either in this inquiry.

For me (connecting again with practice contexts), working in adult mental health services, within a system that constructs meaning with *misguided* certainty, is one of my *guiding* principles. This is explored through the upcoming chapters in much more detail but essentially bringing constructs of mental health into the light (so that they can be deconstructed) is part of *how* I practice, and *why* I practice. Being in inquiry has helped me to view research similarly to how I practice as a psychotherapist, privileging collaborative processes and conversations as a way to be in 'mutual inquiry' (Harlene Anderson, 2009).

Some more talk about methodology

I have opted for the language of 'conversational inquiry' for the talking part of the inquiry as I believe that being 'in conversation', 'in relationship' has been, in and of itself, transformative for me; and I believe (from what our conversations indicate) that it has been transformative for the

women who have been talking with me. It also reminds me that research is *just* ‘another form of talk’ (McNamee 1994). This is why (in thinking about the overall experience of this research) I have moved from the language of *systemic* inquiry to *narrative* inquiry to *reflexive* inquiry, as a way to take account of the movement (that comes from this kind of talk) which has become so central to this inquiry and to my practice. As in therapy this process of transformation is multi-directional, ongoing and constantly in flow. For this reason, the inquiry moves between past, present and future tenses and whilst I have drawn heavily on narrative inquiry, drawing on my own *experiences* and *practices* is perhaps what moves it on *beyond* a traditional qualitative inquiry, and perhaps moves *between* narrative inquiry and autoethnography. Whilst “*narrative inquiry may... be sociologically concerned with groups and the formation of communities*” (Connelly and Clandinin, 2013, p. 2) this inquiry has also paid attention to an autoethnographic approach to research. It attends to “*...personal experience in order to understand cultural experience*’ which also ‘*treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography*’” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p.1). It is not a classic ‘autoethnography’ as such but it borrows heavily from autoethnography and *relational* ethnography (Gail Simon, 2013; Matthew Desmond, 2014) as an approach to inquiry.

Autoethnography revealed

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011), cite eight different forms that autoethnography can take, in the practice of research. *Indigenous or native ethnographers*, they say, work to construct their own ‘personal and cultural stories’ in order to *do* (what I have been naming as) de-subjugation or de-colonisation, to perturb the power that has been serving the dominant discourses.

Narrative ethnographers present stories that represent the study of others, based on interactions between the narrator and the groups that are in the frame of study. Ethnographers

who use *reflexive, dyadic interviews* as their method of doing ethnography focus on the stories of the research 'participants' but the ethnographer illustrates their own story as a way to demonstrate how they have been moved by the interview process. The personal reflections of the narrator is layered with the stories being presented that have come from the interviews.

Similarly, *reflexive ethnographers* illustrate the way a researcher is changed through the process of doing research. In this way, the 'back story' of the researcher's own journey starts to take centre stage. *Layered accounts*, they suggest, is similar in approach to grounded theory in that it demonstrates the simultaneous nature of data collection and analysis; but differs in that it uses vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection (Ellis, 1991). It also offers an illustration of the 'emergent' nature of doing and writing research. *Interactive interviews* are more collaborative in nature than the other approaches have demonstrated. In this approach the participants become co-researchers who are equally interested in the themes that emerge from conversation. The co-researchers already have (or develop) an established relationship with the researcher, with the 'interviews' usually consisting of multiple conversations. The focus of this approach is what is learnt from the interaction, and from what each person brings to the conversation. *Community autoethnographers* similarly use the experience of the researcher alongside participants to show how a community interacts with social and cultural issues. The emphasis is not only on social inquiry but on social intervention. *Co-constructed narratives* as an approach is a shared writing exercise with each person writing and sharing their story with a response offered from other members of the group. *Personal narratives* are, according to Ellis et al., often the most controversial forms of research, whereby the ethnographer is writing narratives about themselves in relation to their professional and personal lives, in order for others/readers to reflect on and make use of the story for their own development.

In terms of these eight defined approaches, the way *my* inquiry has developed is more in line

with *reflexive ethnography* and *layered accounts*, but it differs because it is also uniquely situated within my own practices.

It feels important to reiterate that this represents *insider* or practice-based research, which is embedded within the narrative, autoethnographic approach. I was talking with women who I have worked with as co-facilitators and women who have attended groups that I have facilitated and who have had therapeutic conversation with me in my role as a systemic psychotherapist and group facilitator. As such, it was a collaborative venture and based on already established relationships. Though my story came forth in ways that was not entirely expected, it was and is part of a wider story, a multi-layering or interweaving approach that incorporated the stories of all women involved.

Narrative practices, narrative inquiry and double listening

“... there are many stories that a person can tell about one’s life. The principle behind double-listening is that it opens spaces for the telling of both the trauma story and the response to trauma... (which) provides space to validate and dignify the trauma experience while also creating opportunities to uncover and illuminate the skills and knowledges embedded within the responses that individuals and their associated community have enacted.” (Marlowe, 2010, p. 43).

This quote represents a major theme in terms of the ‘doing’ of inquiry. My initial intention was to ‘listen again’ with women who I have had multiple conversations with about their experiences of oppression, transformation and of being with others. My ‘hunch’ was that this would provide a platform for even more transformative stories to emerge.

In narrative therapy, ‘double listening’ (Michael White, 2006; David Denborough, 2006) allows (as Marlowe, above, also suggests) the opportunity for people to tell their stories of trauma *and*

their stories of 'going on', the resources they drew on, the paths they took. My belief (based on being part of these groups) is that this approach is received with appreciation; that people feel that they are being heard and validated. I also believe that narrative practices can be an integral part of actively challenging oppression at multiple levels. Narrative therapy (White and Epston, 1990; Freedman and Combs, 1996; White, 2000) allows for stories to be heard *and* developed. The 'transformative' function in storying lived experience through the performance of relationship; and through the power of 'witnessing' those stories (White and Epston, 1990) in a therapeutic context is evident. In this research I am particularly paying attention to the group experience (*and* the double listening element of the inquiry) as a co-constructed space that enables new stories to be co-created and shared and where 'preferred futures' (White and Epston, 1990) are generated.

Textual context

Some examples of 'relevant other' inquiries that shaped this early stage are Lather and Smithies' "Troubling the angels" (1997) research with women living with HIV and AIDS, and Sue Holland's (1992) 'social action' psychotherapy practice and research, which is characterised by a focus on personal, social, and political determinants of mental health and wellbeing. I was also influenced by Etherington's (2003 and 2004) publications 'Trauma, the body and transformation' and 'Becoming a reflexive researcher', which were important books for me to read. The first is a reflexive inquiry into the impact of sexual abuse on women, their bodies and their stories of transformation, and the second is a reflection on an inquiry that makes use of different ways of presenting conversations and written material such as poetry and diary formats. In these books, Kim Etherington's own stories and relationships with the other people in the inquiry were very present and the overall impact was one of a multi-voiced collection of stories, which I found incredibly engaging. I am sure that these early reads helped (moved) me to shape my inquiry, in

the way that I have, both aesthetically and methodologically.

I have also used poetry as a means to explore and express more personal aspects of the inquiry; and some of the poems I have written along the way have found a place for themselves in this thesis. Poet-researcher Sandra L Faulkner (2009) suggests that most qualitative researchers who use poetry do so for similar reasons to offer '*poetic representation*', to '*evoke emotional responses*' and produce a '*shared experience between researcher, audience and participant*'. She also suggests that poet-researchers have common goals which include '*evocation, political action, understanding, connection, emotionality*'. (Faulkner, 2009, p.44).

I would not name myself as a poet-researcher (or indeed a poet) but I do relate to these aims. For *me*, poetry enables me to say things in a particular way, with a particular tone and pace, and with a freedom that goes beyond the (potential) limitation of the number of words that are usually contained in verse. I do not consider it as an *essential* component of my research and is not part of the *method* of the conversational stage of the inquiry as I did not use arts based or poetry-based methodology within the 'doing' of inquiry, but it is part of the wider methodological context. I have used it as a way to 're-present' the ideas and themes that emerged from the talking I was part of; as a way to convey and evoke '*political action, understanding, connection (and) emotionality*' (Faulkner, 2009).

As we move into the 'doing' of the inquiry, the 'methods' used, the conversations I was part of, I think it might be helpful for the reader (as it was for me) to hold in mind these wider ideological, conceptual (global) frameworks that have shaped the choices I made at a practice (local) level.

Conversation as (a method of) inquiry

Eight conversations

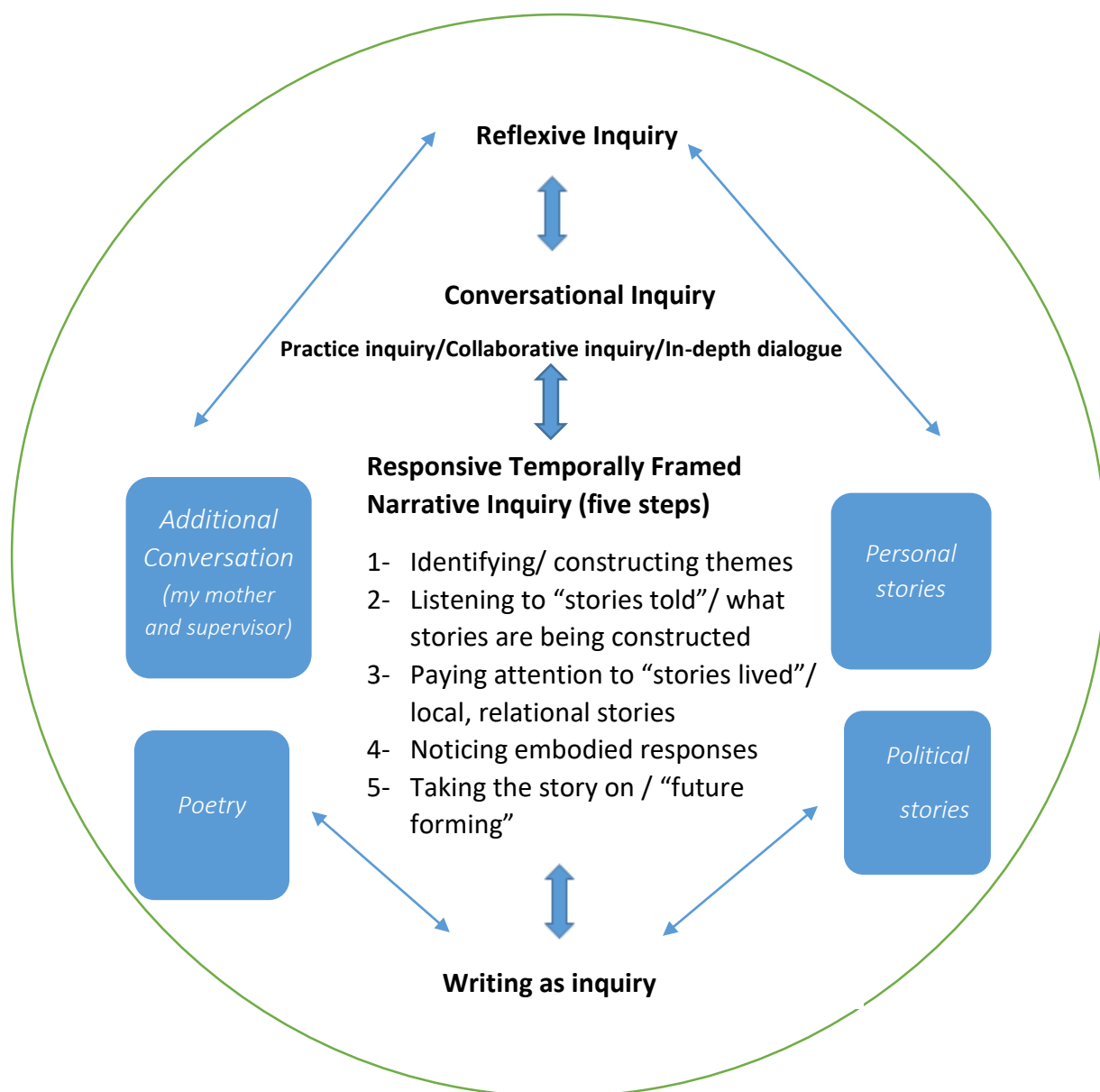
In the *doing* of the conversational inquiry, I followed a particular structure to talking with people I have previously met with either as participants of group I have been part of or co-facilitators of those groups. This was always intended as the main structure of the inquiry, because I had a (pre-conceived) notion that this would be fruitful and interesting talk; that could contribute to my own professional development and contribute to the wider academic and practice community. I had in mind that I (and others) could learn from hearing women's experiences that speaks to (what I imagined would be) both *personal* stories of oppression (and also transformation) and *collective* stories of *challenging* oppression (and transformation through solidarity).

I decided to first meet with co-facilitators, so that I could practice my new way of talking (as a researcher), and then to meet with women who were part of the groups I facilitated. My first conversations then were with two groups of facilitators, then with two groups of women who had been part of the groups I had facilitated; and then I had more *in-depth* conversations with three women from the groups, and one conversation with my supervisor. This resulted in eight conversations (some group and some one-to-one) which were recorded and transcribed. It took this shape.

- Practice inquiry (conversations with co-facilitators)
 - In A) Wales and B) in island community
- Collaborative inquiry (focus groups with women who were part of these groups)
 - in A) Wales and B) in island community
- In-depth dialogues (individual conversations with three women from the groups)

- In A) Wales (1) and B) in island community (2)
- Personal inquiry in to my own practice (a conversation with my clinical supervisor)
- Personal inquiry into my own stories (a conversation with my mother)

This is how I conceptualised the whole...



As I was curious about connection and stories of 'going on' (Wittgenstein, 1953) I adopted some questions from within a frame of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Cronen and Pearce, 1999), which I have already highlighted as being a helpful frame for meaning making. These questions were inspired by Cronen and Pearce's work, and taken from Goldsmith, (2010). I used the following four questions as a framework for all aspects of the conversational inquiry. These questions were originally written in the present tense only. I have added the past tense to open up space for reflection on what we were previously part of (as a retrospective inquiry into group work) but have maintained the present tense in recognition of our *current* creativity, as we are *still* involved in making something together; this time by being in inquiry.

1. "What were/are we making together?"
2. "How were/are we making it?"
3. "What were/are we becoming?"
4. "How did/do we make better social worlds?"

"CMM emphasizes that communication happens as coordinated action and meaning and is made in full view, 'out here' as a co-creation between and amongst people. Therefore, transformation and possibility are more concretely accessible..." (Goldsmith, et al., 2010, p.6).

As I have already touched on, for me, CMM provides a bridge between communication *theory* and how this might look in *practice*, in conversations that move us on, that offer possibilities for transformation and encourage reflexivity. The questions here speak to the temporal frame of the inquiry, *and* the 'cultural situatedness' moving between what we thought we were part of, in a reflective (past tense and *localised*) way; and in how we make sense of that now, in relation to wider ideas of social transformation, in a reflexive, (present to future tense and *globalised*) way.

Most conversations were recorded using an audio recorder, other than the large group ones which were recorded using large paper and pens (at their request). They were then transcribed and inquired into using a five-step inquiry as described in the next chapter.

In addition, I also met with a group in Wales that consists of different women from the ones in my inquiry but represents how the group I co-facilitated has 'gone on' and developed. This group is not one that I co-facilitated, so the women were not known to me, but it is one that has continued from the group I developed (facilitated by my colleague, Julia). This is not part of my main inquiry so was not transcribed and did not go through the five-step process, but has been interesting 'peripheral' material that has helped me think about 'legacies' in different ways. It made me think about how we 'go on' after and beyond specific coming together events; and how these are connected despite the potential 'distancing' dimensions of geography (space) and time. The women in this group have since gone on to develop their own support group, have sourced funding themselves, found a suitable venue (space) and have secured funding to pay for therapeutic support and facilitation. This may be a 'peripheral' story, in relation to this inquiry, but it is an important one in relation to 'going on'; and is a story that speaks to solidarity, much like the one from the island community. They too have taken 'ownership' of their group and taken it on in the direction that felt most appropriate, as a community based intervention. This is one of the outcomes of an approach to group work that privileges 'solidarity'.

Practice inquiry

The first phase of the 'fieldwork' was talking with colleagues in the two different practice contexts, which I have called 'practice inquiry'. These were all female practitioners who I have previously worked with, within these group contexts. This included three collegial/practice inquiries as follows.

Practice inquiry one was with my colleague and co-facilitator of the island group for women

(Lucy), and a previous facilitator of a similar group (Janey) who we consulted with.

Practice inquiry two was with myself and a colleague (Julia) in south Wales who continues to facilitate community wellbeing groups for women, as part of the legacy of the pilot groups that I was part of. There is also additional unrecorded material from a conversation with Julia and our colleague, Ann, who also (at one stage) co-facilitated the groups after I had left the team.

In the dialogue between myself and my colleagues, the conversations were audio recorded. I think it is important to highlight that I consider all of these women not just as trusted colleagues but personal friends. I am invested in their lives, and they with mine, way beyond the aim and 'life' of this inquiry. This might be the first (and to date, the last) time that I have *recorded* our conversations but we have many years' worth of conversations that have no doubt shaped (in various ways) the thinking behind this inquiry and the different practices that this inquiry speaks into and out of. So, in a way, the content of the conversations that are highlighted here are just examples of multiple conversations I have had with Julia, Janey and Lucy and others. Julia, I have known and worked with since 2001, so this is a longstanding (enduring) relationship. Janey and Lucy I have known and worked with since 2012 and since then we have forged strong personal and professional ties.

Below is an example of how the four questions that I chose to use (from Goldsmith, 2010) framed our conversations and how we moved, in dialogue, around and between interrelated themes. It is also an example of how I move between defined roles of 'conversational partner', 'friend', 'colleague' and 'co-facilitator' and what could be described as an 'interviewer', but I think was more of an 'intertwiner'. I was not sticking to a script or specific structure but weaving in to the conversation areas that I had/have become interested in throughout the inquiry. I see this as very similar to my practice as a family therapist, where I might have ideas about how the session might go, (some 'hypotheses' about what is going on for the family); but I try not to get

too bound by those ideas. I remain open to hear and notice important and subtle utterances that might take us in all sorts of different directions.

Cecchin (1987) warned about the dangers of 'falling in love' with your hypothesis which may shut down curiosity, and I think this is valid in a (systemic) research frame also. The conversation I had with Janey and Lucy about being facilitators of groups, I think speaks to the connection with research. Janey, below, is talking about her role as group facilitator but she could easily be mirroring my thoughts on being a practice-based researcher.

Janey I just so vividly remember things that people said ten years ago having spent the rest of my working life listening to people ... it shows the impact of what people do and say in those groups ... that I can still remember so well.. you know, the people, their stories.

I remember how Janey was sitting when she said this. Her head and shoulders were forward of her lower body as if she were 'leaning in' to us, her colleagues. She spoke quietly, purposefully, without any sense of hurry. I remember thinking she might be, temporarily, back in the group, visualising herself talking with other women as we were doing here. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, before she uttered the words 'their stories'. There was a pause afterwards. I looked downwards, connecting with the stories I had heard. Maybe we were all moving between past and present, being present with each other and reminiscing about the groups we had been part of. I felt so connected to Janey and Lucy in this moment and to the many women who had shared their stories with us.

This snapshot illustrates the timeframe of practice that we are *all* connected to. Janey had facilitated a group for women who had been sexually abused in the same island community some ten years before Lucy and I set up the groups that we facilitated. I remember Janey reflecting on her time as a co-facilitator in this recorded conversation, and remember thinking that I had not heard her talk in this way about the group before. I thought this was interesting

and I remember at the time wondering if Janey had thought about this beforehand and made a choice to talk in this way or if the questions I was asking were shaping that; or was it our being together in this way, three women, seated in a circle, in a small and private office space, on the third floor of a hospital building?

I remember feeling really moved when Janey was talking and I now know that Janey (at the stage of this conversation) was in the middle of being informally questioned in her practice as she had been challenging what she had felt was not a 'good enough' quality of practice within her field. Because she was questioning this, *her* state of mind was being questioned in return by senior professionals. I did not know this at the time but I *did* know that Janey was leaving her post and I had reflected afterwards that I had wondered if this had freed her up to talk more personally in our conversation. Knowing what I know *now* about what Janey went through at this time, I feel moved again by her courage and commitment in talking with me for this inquiry whilst she was going through so much herself.

In our subsequent conversations Janey admitted that she had considered cancelling our meeting, not because she did not want to take part, but because her confidence in herself had taken such a dive that she did not feel that she could contribute meaningfully. I think the excerpts highlighted in this thesis demonstrate the opposite. Her words demonstrate her humanity, compassion and competence; qualities that were always visible through our work-based conversations. At the time, neither Lucy nor I knew what Janey was going through so this was not discussed. Instead we picked up on the practice context, the theme of being a group facilitator; and perhaps more personally about what being part of the group meant to us.

Lucy *...and it's like when in one of the groups (cos I've done a few groups in my training and when being qualified) and it's one of the groups I look forward to... it's one of the groups that I never worry about doing... I never think "oh gosh, I've got to do this group"... I look forward to it*

(smiles and looks at me)...

Lucy talks in a more 'up-tempo' way than Janey; her tone is louder, faster, she moves forward at the end of her sentences and her voice rises, as if inviting a response, making eye contact, smiling, seemingly happy for someone to jump in at any moment and say something that connects to what she has said. I notice that I pay attention to this, respond to it, and appreciate the invitational style that Lucy has in conversation. Lucy is young and energetic and has a confidence and presence that belies her (relative) youth. Her reference to her training I think is a nod to Janey, who had been one of her (respected) lecturers; so this adds another (hierarchical) dynamic.

As the conversation moved on, I then had a moment of noticing *myself*, wondering whether it is okay that we are meandering in our stories of practice or whether I should maybe stick more to 'script' (i.e. the four questions that I had decided to use as a loose frame). 'Is this what I am meant to be doing?' I catch myself pondering. What permissions do I need to give myself to get lost in the conversation, to go with the flow, whilst also feeling that I am attending to the 'task'?

The following excerpt perhaps illustrates how I tried to weave a question in without wanting to be too directive in my questions. This would be very similar to how I would practice in my role as a family therapist; working with whatever people bring to the conversation, noticing both subtle and overt permissions to interrupt, to be curious, to ask questions, but also potentially working to stay within a particular frame, if this is what we have negotiated together. My inner thoughts/dialogue is highlighted in brackets.

Leah *So how does that fit with?* (pause, take stock, that's not what you want to say...) Cos one of the questions I had in mind was 'what were we becoming' at that time. I suppose it's quite existential (I remember I was surprised that I had used this word as it is not usually in my repertoire) ideas about becoming, through that process. How was that impacting on ourselves

and our ideas about our practice? ... (it's) really interesting that we're noticing these things about ourselves and I might be wrong, but for me it doesn't sound like it's just something that happened in the moment. It was something that happened and changed over time; like you said, Lucy: "gosh, it's hard to look back cos I feel I've changed so much..."

This is just a small example from the richness of 'material' that the conversations with Julia, Janey and Lucy brought forth; and I could have chosen any number of other examples. This one seemed to 'show itself' to me at the time I was writing these chapters as I was tuning more into the 'doing of inquiry'. I think this example demonstrates *some* of the complexity of the multiple roles I was in as an insider researcher. It also speaks to the temporal nature of the inquiry with Lucy noting how *hard* it is to 'look back' as things have moved on so much; and Janey noticing how *easy* it was to remember the women in the group though it was a decade ago, and me drawing on current practice examples as I reflect on our conversation. In addition, I think it shows the transformative (reflexive) nature of 'talking again' within a practice inquiry. We are all being moved and transformed through our dialogue. This speaks to the intimate nature of the groups we were part of and the relationships that are made through them; how people and stories made lasting impressions that have stayed with each of us.

Collaborative inquiry

This next aspect of inquiry was a retrospective inquiry of/with groups I have previously been involved in, by talking with women who were part of those groups. This could be described as a 'focus group' model, but I think it is better described as 'collaborative inquiry groups' within the wider conversational inquiry.

Some rationale

Focus group research has traditionally been seen as 'collective qualitative data' involving small

numbers of people in group discussion with a focus on a particular theme (Wilkinson, 2004). The ‘participants’ in the collaborative inquiry may be representative of a larger group of people, with members representing a larger community. In some ways, the women in these groups *could* be seen as representative of ‘women with mental health difficulties’, or ‘women who have been sexually abused’ but they are also a defined group with a pre-existing group identity. I do not think though that Wilkinson’s definition (or my use of it) really does justice to the complexity of the relationships and the depth and tone of the conversations. I also do not consider that the conversations were a way to collect ‘data’. The word does not have a place in this thesis.

I prefer instead the definition put forward by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) who suggest that the focus group structure supports a ‘socially oriented’ (Krueger and Casey, 2000) space that can promote open discussion. This is much more in line with how I viewed what I was part of. I would define it as a careful co-construction of a notional space that encouraged ‘stories lived and stories told’ to be generated and explored. This was in line with how the original group was (co)constructed. I was very much an active participant in the conversation as an insider researcher, with a pre-existing relationship with the women I was talking with. As Bakhtin indicates:

“The person who understands (including the researcher himself) becomes a participant in the dialogue, although on a special level (depending on the area of understanding or research)... The observer has no position outside the observed world, and his observation enters as a constituent part into the observed object.” Bakhtin (1986, p.125–126).

Collaborative inquiry groups

As per the practice inquiry, these collaborative conversations took place in two locations, one

being my then current working and living context in a British island community and the other being my previous work context, in a Welsh valleys community.

There were two of these collaborative inquiries in total with members of the original groups coming back together in separate groups, as they were originally made up.

- Collaborative inquiry group one included women who attended a pilot group that I developed and was part of which was a group for women who have experienced sexual abuse, rape or sexual assault. This included four women.
- Collaborative inquiry group two included women who attended a pilot group for women who were part of a community project supporting parents with mental health difficulties. This was to include up to eight women, but was attended by only one, so shifted from a collaborative inquiry group to an in-depth dialogue, in two parts.
- I also met with the current group of women attending the group that had evolved following my involvement. I met with them on two occasions, recording the second conversation. This did not become part of the core conversational inquiry, but offered helpful additional contribution. This group was attended by twelve on the first occasion and five on the second.

Each collaborative inquiry took place over 90 minutes inviting 'open' dialogue, but loosely using the four invitational CMM questions as highlighted previously, paying attention to 'co-construction', 'meaning-making', 'becoming' and 'going on'. There was intentional mirroring of the original group process by offering the opportunity for women to draw/write and create, which had been an aspect of all the groups. Pens, paper, and other art and craft materials were available for women to use. In audio recording the conversations (if consented) I was able to listen back to the recording and I sought permission to take some photographs of any material produced such as pictures, any words written etc. We also met in the place where we originally

came together, to support comfort and safety.

The following excerpt from one of the group transcriptions may illustrate the movement between the different people in the group as they co-construct a rich dialogue, each laying something down, or putting something 'out there' (seemingly) for the next to build on. Implicit and sophisticated 'rules' about listening, turn-taking and respecting each other are demonstrated through the transcription. It feels like a collective (verbal) decoupage or collage as I re-read their words, which is one of the (visual) activities that we did in the group, co-constructing a group picture (or mandala) to represent a sense of shared group identity.

The conversation includes Laura, Anna, Linda and Lucy. Anna is the youngest of the group, in her early 20s, and Linda the eldest, in her late 50s. They were in the same group together whereas Laura was in a different group, but they have been meeting together now for the last six months as a group of women who want to support other women like them by talking about their experiences of sexual abuse. They are courageous, bold and brilliant. We are seated around a large piece of paper (on a large round table) with coloured pens and pencils on offer; and I offer them the opportunity to draw or write anything they choose to. I also ask if they would like to be voice recorded or if they would prefer that I write down what they speak as they speak. They opt for the latter. I use a different colour pen for each person (as I write down their words) to represent their multiple voices.

Laura *We all knew why we were there without anyone having to say anything.*

Anna *And our differences (was part of that), otherwise debate wouldn't have happened. Our differences made for discussion and then understanding. Let's face it, when we started, we didn't even like ourselves. Why would you talk it over with yourself? You want to talk with someone you value and respect. I couldn't see where I was, but seeing where other people were helped me to see that because I valued **them**.*

Lucy (asking a question to the whole group, looking around the group as she does so) So *being in the group allowed you to like each other and then like yourselves?* (There is an emphasis on the last word, said with a question mark, demonstrating an open curiosity).

Linda (nodding, as I recall) *I have huge admiration for the others; I am in awe of how far they have come. It must have taken an awful lot of strength.*

Laura *Going through the group gave me massive strength to get through each step of the way. Everybody was there to support me.*

Linda *I think something like this is ongoing*

As I re-read this conversation, at this point in time, I notice how moved I am by the words that were spoken and the relationships that show themselves not only in the words but in the way that the conversation flows from one person to the next, seemingly seamlessly. This is how I recall it. There was careful attention to who has spoken and whether they had finished before the next person picked up on what they had said. I am reminded of how much respect I had, and have, for these women. If I connect with this through a lens of social constructionism (and in particular with CMM) I could pick up on the hierarchy of meanings, which Cronen and Pearce (1999) say they developed from their understanding of Bateson's (1972) 'Steps to an ecology of mind'.

They also reference Watzlawick, Beaving and Jackson (1967) as influential in thinking about the relevance of the layering structure of context. Watzlawick et al. (1967) proposed that all communication is working on two levels simultaneously, on the basis of 'content' and 'relationship'. Cronen and Pearce developed CMM to build on this idea by adding 'intermediate' levels of meaning. I too am drawn to think about this as *multiple* layers rather than two levels. In this 'model' (if it can be called such) additional layers include paying attention to the

relationships that the communication represent and the cultural and societal 'implicative forces' that shape the context.

So, connecting with this, following the conversation I have taken an excerpt from, reminds me that in this brief interchange there is so much going on, illustrated in the hierarchies of meaning model (see below). In every utterance there is a connection with the specific context of that utterance (a connection with who spoke what before etc.) and a connection with other conversations that have gone before. In the frame also is the nature of the *relationships* between conversation participants; the stories lived and told about self, and self in relation to others; and the cultural, political and societal discourses that have helped frame and shape this particular interaction. I consider that all of this was in the frame in this excerpt, and more. The women are making their own unique contributions, not just in the words they choose to use, but in how they say them, the breaths in between their words, the 'nearly said' words, the holding back and bringing forth.

For example, when Laura says '*We all knew why we were there without anyone having to say anything*' and Anna picks straight up (as if she is finishing Laura's sentence) with '*and our differences (was part of that)...*'. This demonstrates how each utterance is connected and speaks to the story of connection within the *lived* moment; but also in shared *earlier* moments. The content *and* how the exchange takes shape demonstrates that the women have a shared history, which connects to the level of relationship. Laura then takes the conversation on in connecting with her own 'autobiography' of going through a court case at the time of the group. She says '*going through the group **gave** me massive strength to get through each step of the way*'. Then Linda moves it on again to connect with a wider discourse: highlighting the movement of social action. She says '*I think something like this is ongoing....*' which reminds the group of their part in creating 'better social worlds' and reminds me to reconnect with the

questions I was holding in my head.

Hierarchy of Meanings

- Content: (utterance)
- Speech Act: (context for the utterance)
- Episode: (“routine of interaction”)
- Relationships: (routine interaction with particular others)
- Autobiographies: (self concept that is formed through communication)
- Cultural Patterns: (Interpretations that are structured by group norms)

In-depth dialogues

Some rationale

In the description of what it was I was doing in this stage, I initially related to the idea and history of ‘case studies’ as a means to pay attention to what has come before, but I notice that I almost automatically withdrew from the language. I saw/see (and relate with) the women in this inquiry as neither cases nor objects of study.

Michael Susko (1994) challenges the notion of ‘caseness’ in the field of psychiatry specifically (and mental health more generally) where (he suggests) people’s lived experiences are reduced to being a ‘case’. He argues convincingly for narrative approaches as an alternative way to approach such a rich and complex field. In particular, Susko advocates for first person accounts from people diagnosed with mental illness as a means, not only for people to find voice and break through the potentially impenetrable power of ‘caseness thinking’, but also to directly challenge the imbalance of power that this model continues to sustain. This is a political challenge, and one that I agree with. It is important to challenge this thinking. As a psychotherapist practicing in this field, I am often astounded by how easy it is to ‘slip into’ talking about people as ‘patients’ or ‘cases’. *Case studies* might be familiar phraseology in qualitative

research but case *notes*, case *files* and case *histories* are the familiar words in mental health. None of these are particularly helpful or relationally sensitive.

Yin (2009) describes a case study as an empirical study that '*investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and with its real-life context*' and Stake (1995) suggests that the 'case' is not the method but the 'object' of the study; and that the main methods include observation, interview and review. I, however, align myself more firmly with Susko and with allies within a narrative approach by maintaining that people are people, not problems and *not* cases (with reference to Michael White and David Epston, 1990).

In this inquiry I think the focus should be seen more as the 'relationship' rather than the 'content', though both are important elements and certainly at times previously unvoiced personal stories came to the fore. This is why I have named the process 'in-depth dialogues', as a process of talking *about* relationships from *within* relationship, which should be evident in the excerpts from the conversations and in the exploration of the themes that have emerged from that talk (explored later).

An example from these conversations may demonstrate some of the movement that has been happening for us all. Moving from the group experience to more detailed one-to-one conversations, Linda seems to follow on from the themes she raised in the group meeting, a theme of being *part* of something and feeling connected to a wider movement; and brings this into our more intimate conversation. This connects me again to moving between local and global practices *and* wider discourses. Linda speaks to this by summing up the importance the group (and the solidarity she has experienced through this) has had on her life. Her use of the words 'my God' (a particular kind of utterance, said assertively and loudly), I think, highlights the significance of this. I can recall how she said it and I remember that I literally felt a tingle along my spine and a lump in my throat. I could really *feel* how important this was for Linda.

Linda *It's just so nice to know others. My God, somebody else is like me (a breath)... it resonates. I feel **part** of something.*

I also remember the emphasis she put on the word 'part'. She said it with more volume and in a more definite tone, and I note now in reviewing this comment that she is talking in the present tense, so although the group has finished, she is still talking about the impact it has on her life *now*. This was one of the major themes that came out of this phase of inquiry – the transformative nature of the group experience. Another example from my conversation with Anne speaks to the same experience of solidarity and connection.

Anne *In coming to the group, the unique part was that I stopped just thinking of myself as an individual and started thinking wider about what people feel/need.*

And then later, she says, "...you know I stopped seeing you and Lucy as just like therapists and saw you as people I can speak to who understood the way my mind was evolving". Anne illustrates how it felt in the group, that we were *all* part of the story of solidarity and personal transformation. Lucy and I were not standing back *watching* this, we were *experiencing* it, experiencing the *collective* transformation and our own *personal* transformative experiences. I think this is interesting as it connects also with 'anti-caseness', relational ways of coming together in a group context. Anne takes this 'anti-caseness' argument further.

Anne *There's nothing worse than, for me personally, standing next to a doctor telling me "I know what you're saying" and thinking "I know what you should be doing" because you know what? I'm 40 and I'm telling you now, they don't!*

I think Anne's comments are so important. I remember when we had this conversation that I felt little sense of loyalty to my colleagues, to the system I was working within or the medical model that I am (by working *in* the system) connected with. I did not feel torn or compromised in any

way when I listened, nodded, affirmed that I agreed with Anne, because I *did* agree.

I remember sitting next to her, in a small room where I used to see people who come for therapy and where Anne and I would have met in this context also, and I notice that as she sits opposite me today she seems to demonstrate her competence differently to when we met previously; she is more assertive. She is wearing a suit as she has come straight from work, fitting this meeting in to her busy schedule, and has a large scarf, draped over her shoulders. Our body language is very similar, our verbal language is similar; we are a similar age though with different cultural backgrounds and I feel more allied with Anne than I do with this building in which I work, and this room in which we talk. I *feel* the connection that Anne is talking about as I experienced (*am experiencing*) it myself.

I wonder how Anne experiences this. The way we are being together seems to indicate that we *both* feel that things have moved on, and we acknowledge the difference in how we communicate. There is an easier flow to the talk, less emphasis on one person (the therapist or the researcher) asking all the questions with the other person (the client or the interviewee) answering them all, with an unequal say in how the conversation unfolds. We are in *dialogue*.

Judy had been part of one of the groups I facilitated in Wales with my colleague Julia. We begin *our* dialogue by Judy describing her experience of being part of the group as '*...connection*'. She says: '*There was something, within us all, that was having an effect on each of us and it was very powerful, **very** powerful... though we weren't aware of it.*'

Judy is the same age as Julia and I and we have some shared experiences in terms of cultural heritage and some family experiences. Judy is a relational thinker and moves quickly in our conversation to think about the connection *between* the groups that are part of this inquiry, by asking about the 'other' group (the island community group). She asks how we attended to power in our facilitation styles and I explain that we work to provide a context where 'voice and

choice' are privileged. Judy responds by wondering if this is part of a story about 'giving back power' to women who have experienced powerlessness because of their experiences of abuse. I notice that in *our* conversation we are also attending to power by not engaging in what could be classed as a traditional interview. I am probably talking as much as Judy is, and Judy is probably asking me as many questions as I ask her. We are seated, drinking tea, eating cake, talking as colleagues, as peers, as women who have shared experiences, shared histories. This is not like any case study, or any interview that I have seen in my experience of delving into qualitative research within this field. I am aware of the difference and it is not incidental.

Tashakton and Teddlie (2010) in Dawidowicz (2011, p. 6) refer to case studies as '*immersions into one real-life scenario*'. This fits much better for me, so although I have rejected the language of case studies I can connect with the description as an 'immersion'; though I disagree that a 'case study' or an 'in-depth dialogue', or a 'first person account' needs to be based on *one* real life scenario. I feel this might restrain and constrain the flow of storytelling and conversation. It is also not a relational description. A case study suggests an individualised account; with no attention being paid to the relationship *between* the person telling their story and other people, whether that be the person they are directly telling their story to, or a wider audience. First person accounts bring the same individualised, isolated picture to my mind. Using a frame of 'in-depth dialogues' enables (for me) a more relational picture to emerge. It is multi-faceted, relational and 'poly-vocal'. It was also I think an opportunity for the women to reflect over the time *since* their experience in the group and to position themselves in the 'now'; their current lived experience. In this way, I would argue, the dialogue (we were part of) captured more sense of movement and connects with ideas of transformation in a more 'fluid', 'lived' way than a traditional case study would.

"The stories we tell are subject only to the limits of our imaginations; however, the stories we

live are performed in concert with other people..." (Cronen and Pearce, 1999, p. 30).

Talking again, in this part of the inquiry, in a more in depth way, I think, allowed people to take themes from the group discussion or pick up on a different thread to move things on in the direction that felt appropriate to them, to tell their stories 'in concert' with others. It also provided a more intimate context for conversations to develop, and for us all to move on from; and it paid due attention to the close relationships that had developed.

These conversations were over 60–90 minutes and whilst we briefly discussed the four questions highlighted in the collaborative and practice inquiry, I also discussed with the three women how they wanted to capture *their* 'stories', their first person accounts. This stage then perhaps is more readily connected with the context of 'autobiography' within a CMM frame, and with 'stories told'. In this way, I think it deviates from a traditional idea of a 'case study' not just in the rejection of the *language* but also in that it does not present a monologue but a *dialogue* of which I was an active participant. It also seemed as if the different groups were in dialogue with each *other*, as the inquiry gathered momentum and the conversations developed, as demonstrated above by Judy who inquired into the *wider* inquiry. The conversations were also followed up with additional contact via phone, face-to-face meetings, emails, letters etc. as a way to keep the conversation going and ensure that people felt that they had said what they wanted to say. I also spent time checking with people that what I had written down or picked out from what we had discussed was comfortable for them. Judy and I, for example, had two face-to-face conversations, two phone calls and many emails. We still keep in touch as colleagues in the field of counselling.

So to pull some of these threads together. I have offered an overview of the conversational inquiry that I was part of, with other women whose voices are also included. I have given a description of the context to those conversations and offered a picture in terms of the 'form' they

took, as well as some examples of content, offering some commentary on what it was like being part of those conversations at the time and what it felt like listening to them again. I have purposefully framed what I was involved in as 'practice inquiries', 'collaborative inquiries' and 'in-depth dialogues' rather than using phraseology that might be more familiar; and have offered some rationale as to why I have made those choices and some critique of the language that I have chosen *not* to use. Transcribed words from the conversations were treated as 'knowledge in themselves' (Etherington, 2004) but also as part of a narrative inquiry which developed into something bigger (a five-step model which could potentially be replicated) through the process of 'listening again'. The details of this can be found in the next chapter.

Responsive, temporally-framed narrative inquiry – a five-step model

This chapter offers an outline of how I positioned myself in relation to the *transcriptions* of the conversations I had been having with people, how I *immersed* myself in them and then responded to them, keeping them alive, moving them on/ them moving me on. This formed (what would be traditionally called) the ‘analysis’ (or what I have thought of as an ‘in depth engagement’) stage of inquiry. This was a five-step process of inquiring into the conversations I had been engaged in.

This is represented in this chapter in all the different stages, from one to five, using some examples from the transcripts to illustrate how it ‘looked’ and how it might link to the wider inquiry and to the wider theoretical and research landscape.

I used the same approach in how I treated each conversation I had been part of and had recorded; transcribing each one before engaging in these five steps. This evolved over the time of the inquiry and was, in itself, an engaging, relational, responsive, *and* reflexive process. I spent time listening to others, reading about traditional forms of analysis, some more ‘unique’ ones, spent time re-listening to the transcripts and time listening to myself, in terms of what I felt would be ‘right’ or ‘good enough’ or maybe just ‘enough’.

As such, it built up in layers and is both intrinsically and intentionally related to how I practice as a psychotherapist. In stages one, two and three, it could be argued that the ‘content’ of *what* was said and *how* it was said is most present. This might be similar to the early stages of systemic psychotherapy/family therapy when the content of the story (often but by no means always) takes centre stage. In stage four, my ‘inner’ voice and embodied response to the material is most present (mirroring perhaps the stage in systemic family therapy when the therapist shares their inner dialogue or the family listen to a ‘reflecting team’ (Andersen, 1987) who share their thoughts with the family. Then, in stage five, the ‘story beneath’ is most

prominent, perhaps echoing the process in systemic therapy when an element of interpretation is put forward tentatively to see how that fits with the family, a *sharing* of one's hypotheses (Cecchin, 1987).

This stage may seem to deviate from the 'facts' or 'absolute truth' of what has been said, as if I am guessing the intent of my conversational partners, and this would be a fair critique.

However, it could also be argued that in order to hear, respond to and honour the stories that people bring (that is, the stories that they 'tell'), this can never wholly unfold in a one hour conversation or be demonstrated by the words presented in that one conversation alone. In this last stage then I am looking at my own responses to the person I am in dialogue with and paying attention to the ('mutable' and 'relative') truth(s) that they and I bring and how that is part of a wider 'lived' story that will have unique attributes *and* many commonalities with other people's stories of (for example) gendered experiences of abuse and oppression.

Why (lean towards) a narrative approach to inquiry?

"Narrative inquiry is a ubiquitous practice in that, human beings have lived out and told stories about that living for as long as we could talk. And then we have talked about the stories we tell for almost as long. These lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another's assistance in building lives and communities. What feels new is the emergence of narrative methodologies in the field of social science research." (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007, p. 35).

Bamberg (2012) asks this question, '*why narrative?*' and offers multiple responses, which are worthy of attention, which I think can be summed up in this 'story': "...*when engaging in storytelling, people point indexically to how they anchor their position from where they want to be understood*" (Bamberg, 2012, p.207). How it relates to *this* inquiry can perhaps be summed up in this quote "...*narratives are about people (characters), who act (events) in space and time;*

typically across a sequence of events (temporality)” (Bamberg, 2012, p.207). As a counter-balance to the dominant notion that storytelling (and engaging *in* stories) is not a legitimate (enough) way to do ‘research’, Rhodes and Brown (2005) quote Lieblich, Tuval-Masiach and Zilber (1998, p.1) who say that narrative has been criticised for being *‘more art than research’*. Rhodes and Brown respond by questioning why art is seen as not having ‘value as knowledge’ and why this is often assumed rather than backed up. For me, a narrative approach to research connects me with how I am as a therapist (and how I understand myself and my practices) as well as the stories I hear from people I meet in therapy in relation to personal and cultural narratives. It also connects me to my roots in community work and so, fundamentally, this is a story of ‘fit’. I feel that this fit, in part, serves to validate it as a form of research as it is part of a wider relational story. It is authentic. As the quote from Clandinin and Rosiek highlights, it pays attention to ‘stories lived and stories told’ (Pearce, 1994) which is part of how we make sense of ourselves as human, relational beings. As Catherine Kohler Reisman says, *“...a story involves storytelling –a reciprocal event between a teller and an audience”* (Reissman, 2001).

Social justice agenda

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) have written that narrative inquiry can *‘advance a social change agenda’* and *“...create a public space requiring others to hear what they do not want to hear”*, thus forming the *‘basis of a social movement’*. Michael Bamberg (2012) argues that a narrative approach (to inquiry) views the narrative as having two core components – one is at the level of experience (story lived?) and the other is at the level of sense-making (story told?) (Pearce, 1994). The bracketed questions are my own responses, holding in mind CMM distinctions between stories lived (which I have described earlier and which I tend to see as narratives we perform in everyday living and relating) and stories told (what I tend to see as narratives that we purposefully choose to tell about ourselves in conversation with others). This also fits with a

narrative therapy approach which sees story ‘telling’ as ‘re’ or ‘co’ construction, not just ‘de’ construction. Not just finding meaning ‘in’ the story but *through* it, creating new stories that speak to social justice. Bamberg makes distinctions between ‘narrative as genre, narrative as method, and narrative methods’. Narrative as method is dialogic and embodied. It is inherently relational and action orientated.

“The term narrative as method implies a general approach that views individuals within their social environments as actively conferring meaning onto objects in the world... If narrative is elevated into ‘the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful’ (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1) then it makes sense to argue that the stories we tell are such because they reflect the stories we are” (McAdams, 1993; Randall, 1995) (In Bamberg, 2012, p. 79–80).

So, as noted, this five-step process grew out of my experience of, and sense-making of, narrative therapy and narrative analysis. I was also influenced by reading Keeney, Keeney and Chenail’s ‘Recursive Frame Analysis’ (RFA) work (2012) which provided a baseline to think about what it was that I was trying to do, how it fitted with my ideas of research and how that fitted with the self of the therapist – the *me* bit that I bring to my practice. I have by no means replicated this approach, mainly because RFA has been developed for the analysis of therapy, to inform practitioners about how their verbal input moves the conversation on, which is not what I am inquiring into. I am less interested in ‘analysing’ my *performance* and more intent on listening to what women were telling me, and paying attention to the *relational performance* that we are all part of.

However, my appreciation of Keeney et al.’s approach made me think more about dialogue as performance and narratives as *plots* or *scenes*. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on my style of talking and relating, which was a helpful addition. It took me back to my drama training (some 20–25 years ago) and got me thinking about method acting, immersing yourself in a character

and storyline, bringing every aspect of yourself to the stage in an intense and intimate fusion between actor and character. In the performance there is a 'truth' that is portrayed and yet with even the best method actors (perhaps even more so with the best) the audience are also aware that they *are* actors, temporarily living in their character's skin. Perhaps this is another way of thinking about 'stories lived and stories told'. The story *told* is that of the character but the story *lived* is the intersection between both actor and character. This does not make it less authentic; it *adds* to the authenticity.

As I was reading this and reading more about *narrative* as a form of inquiry, different layers (and potential players) seemed to *reveal* themselves to me in the transcripts I was engaging with. Each step I took seemed to invite another one, one that would take me deeper *and* wider. Not to *find* something I believed to be there, not an excavation; this was more of an honouring, explorative process. However, each step I took, I felt that I was not doing 'enough' justice. Looking at 'themes' did not feel quite 'enough' within the frame of resistance. I decided therefore not to engage in a pure 'thematic analysis' as I might have chosen to do, and I did so with consideration.

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that thematic analysis should be seen as a first 'go-to' (my wording) method for qualitative analysis; and highlight its flexibility as well as its simplicity, but also note that there is a lack of clear and concise guidance to direct researchers in how to make use of it. Its simplicity and flexibility is perhaps enticing for novice researchers but, for me (though I own my novice status), it did not offer enough attention to *complexity* within its flexibility to be of use to me in and of itself. It did not feel that it would be 'enough' to 'do justice' to the stories that I had heard and the conversations I had been part of. I have engaged in a thematic analysis before, within the frame of a 'constructivist grounded theory' (Charmaz, 2000) and I found the process too clinical, too cold, too removed from the warmth of the words that I

had experienced in the conversations I was part of. Whilst I appreciated the rigour that this frame provided, it also seemed like the very nature of that rigour was constraining, like overprocessing food and losing all the flavour and inherent 'goodness'. I am reminded of the now 'infamous' quote from Gregory Bateson: "*Rigor alone is paralytic death, but imagination alone is insanity*" (Bateson, 1979). I did not want to 'paralyse' myself or lose the flavour of any of the stories that women shared with me by engaging in a process-heavy analysis or by using something 'ready-made' that did not emerge from what I was *feeling* at this stage. I wanted to honour my own senses and sense-making abilities by developing something based on embodied experiences of being 'in inquiry'.

So whilst I opted to evolve and develop my own approach, based on experiences of being *with* the 'material' gathered (from the conversations I had been part of) I was also very mindful of doing a 'good enough' job to a) feel that I was 'doing enough justice' with the stories I had heard and b) to be able to 'defend' the decisions I had made in an academic context.

Wendy Lutterell (2000) puts forward the idea of 'good enough' qualitative or ethnographic research, advocating for the tensions and crises within feminist informed research (as does Lather, 2007; and Doucet and Mouthner, 2006) to be made *visible* as part of being/doing 'good enough' research. I was *very* aware of the tensions within me as I began this stage of inquiring into the conversations I had recorded. I am not even entirely comfortable with the word 'analysis', let alone the processes that I associate with the word, hence my decision to not call it an 'analysis', but to maintain the language of 'inquiry'. I needed to find a way to keep these tensions visible and heard and I needed to reconnect. Stages two to five were all developed in response to that 'call' for reconnection.

This is how the five step model looked (or at least how I conceptualised it) followed by a more detailed description of each stage.

Stages	Description	Does it “feel enough”?
1- Identifying/ constructing themes	In listening to the transcripts what key words/ideas/ concepts stand out/ are repeated or said with emphasis?	No, this does not do the conversations or our relationship “justice”.
2- Listening to/ for “stories told”	In listening to the transcripts again what do I notice we are talking/ not talking about? What wider/ global stories does it relate with? What dominant or subjugated discourses are noticeable?	No. As an imagining exercise, this helps me think about untold stories but I notice I have neglected the <i>other</i> unsaid stuff, what is happening between my conversational partner and I.
3- Paying attention to “stories lived”	In listening to the transcripts again, what do I notice about the local story that is being lived out in our relationship? How are we being together? What does this tell me about our relationship and about the themes I have identified?	Not yet, though this feels useful. This tells me something about what was happening locally between us “then”, but what about “now”? What is happening in/ with me as I re-read our conversations?
4- Noticing embodied responses	After meditation, I listen again. What do I notice about my embodied responses? How am I moved by what I hear and notice? And how does this connect to the wider themes? What else does this tell me?	Not quite. Maybe I need to widen the lens now. This has helped me move from past to present tense and from global to local stories but what about where this takes us next? Moving to future tense may broaden the story.
5- Taking the story on	After listening again, how do I imagine the story going on? What are the less well developed stories? The stories that are hidden or half hidden? The stories not yet told? How would I tell them? And how does that move my thinking on? What do I notice I am being moved to write about?	Yes, now I can move on to write about the conversations I have had and the (multi-layered) noticings that came about through re-listening to those conversations- to honour the stories that people have shared with me and the relationship that developed between us.
Moving to writing as inquiry-writing into and out of the themes that have emerged. Connecting with personal and political stories of injustice, moving between local and global and current and past contexts is part of the methodology.	I begin to write about all that I have learnt from the conversations and from what emerged from the five stages. I use the 8 themes (from stage 1) as headings.	I feel grounded enough and free enough to write about what the conversations have moved me to feel, connecting with personal and practice based experiences and the wider political context. This connection is important. It keeps social justice in the (temporal and spatial) frame.

Stage one: eight themes

Although I was not planning to engage in a thematic analysis per se, it felt appropriate to begin a process of paying attention to the *content* of the conversations I had transcribed and I needed a way to *begin* that. I chose to begin by noting key words and themes that were prominent in the transcripts. I pulled out from the written transcripts, words that were **emphasised** in the telling, by the teller (paid attention to in the notes I had made on the transcripts), sentences that seemed **key** to the conversation (which had moved the conversation on in some way), and **ideas** that I remembered as being central that had perhaps already been framed as ‘themes’ of what we talked about. This might include ‘meta’ themes; for example, words that were not actually said but that ‘spoke to’ a wider discourse (for example, deconstructing roles and rules). It may be helpful here to use some examples to explain what I mean by the three different types of themes and sub themes that I was picking out and writing down.

Words with **emphasis** might include a phrase like ‘safe place’, a phrase that Anne uses when describing her experience of coming to a group for women who have been sexually abused.

The conversation goes like this:

Leah *What do you think or feel that we were making together when we were all part of this group?*

Anne *Creating a safe space! **Definitely** creating a safe space for the women involved to be able to come together.*

These were the exact words that Anne used; the use of an explanation mark in transcribing denotes that this was said with emphasis (as I recall her doing, by raising the volume and tone of her voice), and the fact that she repeats the phrase also suggests that this is important for *her* to emphasise. I wrote ‘definitely’ in bold letters as I recall that she said this word with real

purpose, looking me in the eye as she said so, her eyes a little wider. I pulled this (safe place) out as a sub-theme, which later came under the theme of 'collective transformation' as this connected other sub themes. I felt connected to her when she looked me in the eye, her own eyes widening, a smile forming, and I felt connected to the idea that she was putting forward as she moved forward in her seat.

Safety seemed like such an important word as part of the research and an important theme as a reflection of the group that we were part of, which I was now *researching*. I agree with Vikki Reynolds (2014b) when she suggests that creating the conditions for safety when beginning conversations like the ones we were having in the group, is not just *preparation* for 'the work', it *is* 'the work'. It is important that we pay attention to the language that we use in this phase of constructing a 'safe enough' space. In this space, the opportunities for 'key moments' (potential for transformation) are vast.

In this phase of inquiry I have classified as '**key** moments' words that seem to move us on in the conversation, perhaps taking another turn or maybe enriching and widening already *deep* talk. These words then became 'sub themes'. In my conversation with my colleague Julia, we had been talking about motherhood in relation to us as facilitators and this interchange seemed to move us on to talk about gendered identities and what it means to be a woman. I therefore classified this as a sub-theme of 'womanhood and motherhood' and as a 'key moment' in the conversation. When bracketing these themes into wider sets across the seven interviews, this came under the theme of 'deconstructing roles and rules' as this fits with a deconstruction of language and of gendered discourses (discussed later).

Leah *See, I think that woman and mother are just so intertwined.*

Julia *People almost use them, certainly womanhood and motherhood, I think are used as...*

Leah *Interchangeably.*

Julia *Yeah, or if you see the word womanhood I think you often connect that with motherhood.*

This is an example, I think, of how sub themes feed into wider themes and it is also an illustration of the relationship between myself and Julia. It is noticeable how we finish each other's sentences and flow into each other. I wonder if *this* is a gendered interaction. We have been doing this for so many years (to the extent that people have commented on it) and I recognise that I am in danger of no longer noticing it, no longer being curious about what it means, what wider stories it may be part of. This could *also* have become a theme; how the nature (and unsaid markers) of relationships show themselves in the transcripts; perhaps grouping under a heading of 'relationship'; but I chose (in this stage) to focus more clearly on the content rather than the process (later stages move much more so into process). I was, however, becoming curious about what was unsaid as well as what was said. This shows itself by highlighting 'ideas', not just 'words'.

An example of '**ideas**' that inform a theme would be that neither my conversational partner nor I have been explicit in *saying* a particular word, but when re-reading it seemed to speak *to* a wider story, narrative, or even discourse. Of course, I could have entered into the territory of 'discourse analysis' here, and that *could* have been the next step I took, especially as many analysts highlight this as (being seen as) '*the prime way of doing social psychological research*' (Antaki et al., 2002). If I am honest, I did not do that because it 'simply' did not *feel* right, despite what might otherwise seem a 'good fit'. A method of analysis that is (essentially) preoccupied with power would seem well-matched with a therapist-researcher who claims that she is also preoccupied with power; and yet it was 'not meant to be'. In hindsight, I could offer a more attuned rationale for that. I could name a discomfort with using *any* ready-made form of

analysis, and anything that involves following a set of rules that have been pre-designed. I can also connect with wider critical theory as part of my rationale.

Ruth Breeze (2011) has traced and analysed the history of critical discourse analysis with much more coherence and rigour and, using a critical lens, has suggested that the framework that has been used to legitimise the theories of discourse analysis is problematic and potentially contradictory; itself becoming a discourse worthy of critical analysis. Michael Billig (2002) who has been defined as a critical discourse analyst has also suggested that becoming 'mainstream' or 'an intellectual orthodoxy' as an approach to analysis is inherently challenging for the analyst and for the model. For me, the language of *analysis* is also worthy of critique.

Analysis (just like 'caseness') in the context of mental health can very much be part of a story of oppression (and also worthy of its *own* analysis and deconstruction). It could far too readily be part of a story of diagnosing, labelling and subjugating. I recall very early in my role as a psychotherapist (then working in the voluntary sector) a woman coming to talk with me who had experienced sexual abuse, rape and intimate partner violence; and had previously seen a CBT (cognitive behavioural) therapist as recommended by her GP (general practitioner). During this intervention she had been told that she was experiencing 'cognitive distortions'. She had kept a piece of paper that had these words on, and came to see me with this, presenting it to me. What she had taken from this is that she had a diagnosis of 'dysfunctional thinking'. When she talked with me about her experiences she did so with the belief that it was not what had *happened* to her that was 'wrong' but how she *thought* about it, that her thoughts were *distorted*. We got to work on this right away, deconstructing the language, co-creating preferred ways of making sense of her experiences, but I was amazed by the certainty she came with that this is what the 'problem' was, the way she *thought* about her experiences, not that she *had* been raped, beaten and abused by men she knew intimately.

In an interesting book that questions whether therapy is working, Paul Moloney (2013) refers to therapy as an *industry* that has developed in a way that suggests that the problems that people face stem from the way they see the world, rather than questioning what is 'wrong' with the world. Not only does he challenge this notion, he also challenges the 'science' that the industry has been based on. I feel simultaneously uncomfortable and encouraged in reading challenges such as this; and notice that I do not feel obliged to offer a defence of the *industry* that I am part of. The example I offer from practice also does little to defend the helpfulness of a therapy that frames people's thinking as 'wrong' when they have had experiences that speak more to oppression than depression. In this case, offering a framework of 'dysfunctional thinking' was seen as a diagnosis that is inflexible, permanent and undermining of the human experience. It also 'invisibilises' the multiple stories of resistance, resourcefulness and relational complexity that had remained covered up. This is not what I wanted to do in this inquiry. The women who are part of this multi-voiced inquiry (myself included) have already had 'enough' of *those* kinds of experiences.

Being attuned to this, I also recognised that I still felt dissatisfied, somewhat disengaged, and (as described), found myself looking for other ways to feel a 'good enough' conversational partner, one that is working the edge of 'de-subjugation'. If I were to start this process over again, it may be that I would leave out this first step, but maybe I would not; it is difficult to tell, as each inquiry should feel unique and personal. For the purpose of *this* inquiry, it feels important to keep it in as it is a relevant part of a story of development. It reminds me of the flawed nature of research and of the researcher; and I do not mind being reminded of this. It is part of how I develop a kind of critique of what I was/am engaging in, and how I remain open to the possibility of transformation. It also helped me to move on to the next phases. Maybe in some small way the way that I developed the five steps of this inquiry was a *kind* of resistance, resisting an 'off the shelf' method or model of analysis, and paying more attention to what I 'felt'

was ethical, responsive, and ‘good enough’.

A kind of ‘knowing’

By moving on to the next stage then I am not saying that the first stage was not ‘right’ or did not have some intrinsic value, as I am not saying that ‘thematic analysis’ is inherently *wrong* just because I rejected it as the method for me; I am however acknowledging that it did not feel right *for me* and did not feel ‘complete’. Of course, we can argue that inquiry should/will never be ‘complete’, but it also did not feel ‘good enough’, or questioning enough of my own assumptions embedded in the process.

Of course, this way of ‘knowing’ that it was time to move on, is not *un-situated*, not without context. Whilst I might consider myself an intuitive person, someone who pays attention to my instincts, what I feel in my body and experience with my senses, I am also a keen learner who has been involved in education (as a learner and as a trainer) for much of my life. I have therefore learnt a great deal about how I might be called upon to respond in any given situation. I have learnt this through being taught and through being *within* learning (social) environments that have supported my learning, not least in my training to ‘become’ a systemic psychotherapist.

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) have asserted (amongst others) that knowledge formation *is* a social activity, a ‘situated learning’ that is beyond skill acquisition and is associated with the co-construction of knowledge and meaning-making. As a previous ‘student’ of The Family Institute in Wales, I cannot *not* have been influenced by this as this is a dominant principle in the teaching and learning experience, an approach that has been encapsulated by the word ‘dysgu’ (the Welsh word for ‘to learn’ and ‘to teach’, explored more later). This has been adopted as a metaphor of choice by the lecturers at the Institute (as evidenced in Vivien-Byrne and Hardy, 2014) as a marker for what it means to be in a learning experience that is co-

constructed by the 'community of practice' it encompasses (Wenger, 1998).

It is also relevant to question the notion of 'knowing' which could also be viewed as being situated within a wider or (what Nowotny et al., 2001, have called) a scientific elitist' backdrop. They suggest that it is important to deconstruct the notion of 'science' and where modernist ideas of 'knowledge' originate from. Because I am involved in learning environments and in a medical context where 'science' is privileged, this *does* feel relevant. Understanding science and the medical model as a 'construction' has helped me to maintain the position that themes that come from 'talk' are no less knowledge-based.

These themes were also part of a story of (co-) construction and not without a much wider situatedness that the combination of theory, practice examples and personal reflection, hopefully speaks to. This is the context from which the eight themes 'emerged', *or* were 'constructed'.

The eight key themes identified through this process of *comfortable enough* 'in-depth engagement' then formed the structure for the rest of thesis, taking the shape of a chapter each.

To recap, the themes identified in stage one were:

- *deconstructing roles and rules*
- *doing solidarity*
- *co-constructing preferred futures*
- *'going on' from legacies of abuse*
- *challenging 'them and us' thinking*
- *unpacking power*
- *doing justice*
- *doing research (as an act of resistance)*

Having identified these themes, I could have, of course, moved straight into reading and writing into these 'ideas'. However, at this stage, I just felt like I was 'scratching the surface' of what felt like significant and meaningful conversations. I needed some further ways to make sense of the complexity of the conversations; to move beyond verbatim quoting of the talk we were engaged in, without feeling that I had 'sold out' to reductionism. The next stages were a way to honour not just the *content* of what we talked about but the importance of the relationships that provided the *context*, and paid attention to the idea of 'situated knowing', the 'community of practice' that we had collectively formed (Wenger, 1998).

Stage two: stories told

In this next stage, I borrowed heavily from an existing understanding of narrative inquiry, to think differently about the language of 'analysis' and inquiry. Instead of thinking about being analytical, breaking things down, getting in to the minutiae, I reconnected with narrative inquiry as an *exploration* of 'stories lived' (Pearce, 1994) or 'stories we are' (Bamberg, 2012) and looked through the words in the transcripts to hear again the stories that related to lived experience and the stories that are 'told' (Pearce, 1994) that *speak* to lived experience. I am not looking into particular words and particular themes but giving myself permission to get a bit more 'lost' in the words to feel/hear/see the narratives within, to use all my senses. To borrow again from Keeney et al. (2012), I am immersing myself in the plots or storylines and engaging with the actors and narrators, not as an observer, but as someone who is both *in* the stories and aware of the stories that are developing. Bamberg (2012) tells us that "...everyone not only has a story but also has a right to tell their story", but also notes that storytelling and listening is not unproblematic and warns that the "...the emergent whole is more than its linguistic components" (Bamberg, 2011, quoted in Bamberg, M., 2012, p. 79).

So in this process, in the 'storytelling' nature of the conversation, or *performance*, and the

relationships the conversation speaks to, I deliberately try to be 'in the flow' of the storytelling and listening and not fixated with 'component parts'. Here is an example of what I wrote at this second stage of re-reading the transcript of my colleague Julia and I talking together.

I notice a story about story telling (what could be called) – a meta-story. There are two women here who are telling part of their stories and are talking about how they go on in life telling half stories, but they (we) do not reveal the whole story even to each other, as colleagues and friends of many years.

I could take the story on now, writing my current thoughts, or my thoughts coming through as I write, writing *itself* a portal into other hidden and half hidden stories.

So, even after 15 years of relationship, we still 'hold back'- our lives still only partially visible. This is an important aspect of the inquiry; and even this theme is still only (as yet) partially visible. The invisibility of women, just touched upon, with the most delicate of touches.

This second stage was an important one as it transported me back to how I felt at the time of the conversations as well as offering permission to check in with myself *now* as to what sense I make from these conversations and how they might move me on. What was my sense of the story and of the atmosphere at the time?

I can reflect on this now in my conversation with Julia. I have known Julia for so many years and feel connected with her in so many ways and yet in moments of re-reading the transcript of our conversation I also experienced many tensions, even a *disconnect*. If I am honest with myself, and with Julia (as I have been in our conversations), I think this is a story about class and our different back stories. I am experiencing tension in whether I feel more connected with Julia and the stories she brings to *her* practice or whether I connect more with the stories of women we

speak with in our roles as psychotherapists and co-facilitators. In some ways, I am not sure of why this feels significant, but I notice it as something that creates distance rather than intimacy in our conversation; and I find myself wondering if this had been noticeable to Julia when we spoke. Had I *been* distancing in how I engaged with my friend, my colleague, who I have so much respect for? Or had this (like so many other women's stories) been invisible? Or partially visible maybe? Maybe I am feeling more 'in solidarity' with women who have experienced similar personal journeys to mine rather than 'in solidarity' with someone who has experienced a similar *professional* journey. This is a complex, relational story that deserves more attention and is expanded on later in this thesis (in *challenging them and us thinking*). It is also a story of its time and what was going on for me at the point that I was re-reading these transcripts.

Temporality

So, this is also part of the temporal frame. Though I am mostly privileging the stories that were told *then* which were often a 'looking back' (*reflective*) dialogue about what had happened before, it does not stand still. There is a movement back and forth, a *reflexivity*, between the past and the present, captured in the stories, in my reflections on them and in the connections I make with current practices.

I have heard it said that there is no one definition of time. For something that we, mostly, take for granted and probably have multiple assumptions about, this is intriguing. In ancient philosophy, the Greeks used two words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. The first, as the name suggests, refers to chronological, quantifiable time; the second was used for describing the qualitative nature of time and the idea of a 'right' moment.

I am no expert in this area of philosophy (or any, in fact), but how I make sense of this is that time can be seen as 'the time' and 'a' time. I might also describe the difference as a moment rather than a minute. The time now as I am typing is 18:28; this is 'the' time, and I am living in a

particular time of my life, in 'a' time that is (presently) dominated by my studies, and it may be described with more words, more emotion, more spontaneity. It is a more relational description of time perhaps; it offers context.

In this (retrospective) inquiry when noting the temporal nature of talking with women who I used to be part of a group with, I am aware of both 'the' time (a past tense) when we were working together and 'a' time (present tense) now that I am noticing what I feel, how I feel, what I am moved by. Therefore, whilst I might pay some attention to quantifiable time (noting the length of conversations, for example), I am *mostly* referring to more qualitative definitions of time – or kairos.

The well-publicised "Kairos document" (1985) is not only a good example of describing kairos, of time as 'action', but is also a good example of how language and the written word can have a profound impact on social issues. This document was written by black South African theologians who were calling for change in the evident divisions in society, embodied by the church in South Africa. The document begins with the words '*The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived*'. This is a bold start to any document but for one that is raising an issue as serious as this one, it is more than a *notional* bold use of words; it *is* a 'call for action'. I have talked about my research in similar words, perhaps also somewhat boldly, as *my/our* time to act.

An example of how this concept of time is referred to *within* the inquiry can be seen in this excerpt from the transcript of my conversation with Anne, where Anne brings the idea of 'preferred futures' into the frame. Anne is an Asian woman, the same age as me (early 40s) who has experienced sexual abuse in her country of origin and as an adult was raped in her adopted country, England. This is one of her stories, but she has many more. Anne is also a professional woman, is in a loving relationship and is a lover of animals and nature. She tells me that at times in her life, despite her resourcefulness and her loves and interests, she has not been able

to see a future for herself as her past experiences have been so traumatic that they interrupt her present experiences of life. I have previously had conversations with Anne in my role as a psychotherapist as well as being part of the group for women who have been sexually abused. She is intelligent, warm, funny and engaging; and our conversations have been varied.

Anne *So what you did, you made us see a future (pause) and it also (cos a lot of us have been seeing therapists or on antidepressants) and to some point you get so used to seeing somebody and expecting somebody to help you, you know whenever you go through or come to a bump, you wait for your therapist/your meeting to kind of discuss it...*

I think what Anne makes visible here is a dual action of looking back and looking forward, talking of the past and naming a future. In my inquiry into our 'engagement *with*' this conversation, in stage two, I also pick up on this temporal frame. In stage one, I name this as a sub-theme, which I call 'old to new narratives', which then came under the theme of 'co-constructing preferred futures'. It also touches on the theme of 'challenging them and us thinking', in paying attention to the differentiated relationship of therapist and person in therapy; which in itself was changing, being re-framed. This also connects with what I have just discussed in my reflections on my conversation with Julia. Am I a 'them' or an 'us'? And what on earth is the use of such a binary? So whilst I might be questioning how the relationships I am in are being *defined*, I very aware of the importance of the relationship in how I make sense of myself and the practices I am part of.

Stage three: stories lived (local stories)

Therefore, in this stage of the five-step inquiry, I felt that it was important to pay attention to the *currency* of relationship. I felt that, in stage two, I had responded to the plots or the 'back stories', the legacies of abuse and other relationally framed narratives. It seemed like I was touching on the stories that were moving from the private to the public. But I felt that I had not

touched on the stories that were embedded *within* the nuances of not what was said but *how* it was said, the subtleties that say something about the relationship of the two (or more) people within the conversation. As Michael Bamberg voices, '*what narrators accomplish with their stories is first of all highly local business*' (Bamberg, 2010, p. 83).

The focus here, Bamberg tells us, is of storytelling as an 'activity', not just as a collection of words, but a *performance* of telling. It is made up of not just the writer, the narrator, but also the audience, and so we all collectively make up part of the 'whole' of the narrative. So I am moving here to what could be seen as a second order definition of change and relationship, being aware of the social construction at the micro and macro levels, from the moments that define us in relationship, to wider cultural markers. I am not just paying attention to the narrators of the story, but also to their relationship with me, the conversational partner, and now also the 'outsider witnesses' (White and Epston, 1990), the audience, or a wider frame of reference and how it connects with a wider discourse. It is not just the content of the story but the relationship *between* the narrator and listener that I am bringing to the attention of the reader (audience) and highlighting the constructs within.

My notes from the conversation with women in the collaborative inquiry (Anna, Laura, Linda and Lucy) speak to this relationship within a temporal frame. We have existing relationships that are in the frame of our conversation and we are, in a very live way, relating with each other in our conversation. Here is an excerpt from my notes:

At a local level, this is a story of how women of all ages and backgrounds can come together and talk, connect and listen with each other, each making space for the other. The 'facilitators' become part of the group, part of the story of development. I notice also a story of my own transformation, from group facilitator, to group member, to researcher.

This theme emerged also in conversation with Julia, as we talked about what we both named as

a different 'style' that we might adopt as a group facilitator rather than as a psychotherapist – a more conversational, open style which is more likely to include stories from our lives. In conversation with Janey and Lucy, we also found ourselves talking about personal and professional identities, and how these may be constructed and deconstructed, developed and 'dismantled' (as Janey puts it).

Janey *Also I think...* (here is the moment when the conversation moves from talking 'about' the group and our relationship to it, to what we are doing now, in this present moment, it becomes a dialogue about dialogue)... *and I'm listening to myself now... and I'm talking like I'm at work.*

Leah *Ah yes, yeah!*

Janey *And I'm not talking ... I'm not free enough to talk as I would at home about my work, you know.... I'm carefully thinking about the words I use (laughs) and no swearing...*

Lucy (laughs and nods)

Leah *And that's natural, isn't it, to have personal and professional identities?*

Janey *Well, it's encouraged*

Leah *Yes, rather than natural, you're quite right, it's constructed.*

From my notes...

As a local story, this is a present tense context that speaks to the 'knowledge' we all share that this is an 'interview'; we play the part of being co-researchers (we conform to the expectation of turn taking, listening to each other, not interrupting, working to answer the questions posed etc.).

But this is also a story of resistance; we are resisting oppression in this very

conversation as well as talking about acts of resistance...

Stage four: local, present tense, embodied narratives

This next stage was a response to what I felt I needed to bring the inquiry up to date, to move in to the present tense, in an embodied way. I became interested in what was changing *within* me, not just in my practices, in ways that can be looked at for tangible difference, but in how I *viewed* myself as a practitioner, and how I was moved by the process of the inquiry, what I noticed 'happening'. I honoured my roots and interests in embodied ways of 'knowing' as a mindfulness practitioner, a Reiki 'practitioner' (I do not practice, though I am qualified), as an aspirational (very, very amateur) artist and poet and (previously) as a drama practitioner. I wanted to pay attention to what I was feeling, as well as what I was 'thinking', if indeed these can be separated out. Nora Bateson (2016) may point out that this is a false dichotomy and may story this as 'think/feel'. I would tend to agree, but there are also times I notice that I get drawn to talk about these experiences within a binary. 'Mind/body' can also, too often, for me become mind *or* body and I can end up in a Cartesian vortex. I think this is because, in my experience, I have tended these worlds differently and kept them separate. In a *medical* setting, these conversations are often sidelined, 'invisibilised', though the emphasis on compassion focused therapies and mindfulness is perhaps bringing *some* aspects to light (as long as they can be shown to be evidence based). So, in this stage, I made the decision to bring to the forefront this aspect of my practice, to 'de-privatise' my embodied self.

An excerpt from my notes following on from a conversation with my supervisor goes some way to illustrate the tension I feel in this area of practice. I made these notes following meditation at this 'third read' stage of analysis.

I feel a slight sadness, or maybe it is fear, a residual feeling in my chest. I sense a loss that I did not make space in this conversation for talk of creativity, intimacy, love. Why

did I/we edit these subjects out, or not make space for them? I wonder as I write this about the invitation at the moment (in the field of psychology) for compassion based ideas, and I question whether health services really want compassionate practitioners, people who are more open to and vulnerable to their own sadness and the sadness of others? Or whether this is half-hearted, an empty gesture, or even worse, a risky invitation, inviting exposure only to find a 'soft spot', in order to 'go in for the kill'. Can our workplaces and practice bases ever be filled with compassion? What would need to change in order to create that space?

So, as is perhaps already evident, I decided to take a risk and practice some meditation (I used a self-directed body scan to do this, a meditation recognised in mindfulness practice) before once again re-engaging with the transcripts, embracing an invitation to be moved, to be vulnerable and to notice my own vulnerability. In doing so, I re-engaged with the transcripts, not reading them word for word this time, but holding them, touching them, breathing on them, living with them. After a 20-minute meditation practice (a 20-minute space) where I remained in silence, I then wrote down the words that came to me, from all my ways of 'knowing'.

I offer an example from my notes on my conversation with Janey and Lucy, following on from above that perhaps speaks to how this opened up a space for vulnerability.

After meditation I notice a sticking in my throat. I feel this as a residue of shame, the shame that I still embody as the fear of telling the truth. I still can't say it... I shudder.

So hopefully it is possible to see that I am paying attention to what I think/feel in this moment, being present, noticing what I feel in my body, particular sensations and where I felt them; and also allowing my thoughts to wander from that, free flowing. It is probably self-explanatory but what I was paying attention to in this stage was my embodied 'in body' experience and in this example that was felt within my throat area. When talking about voiced and unvoiced

experiences of abuse and oppression, this is perhaps not unexpected, often people talk of feeling a 'sticking in the throat' when voicing or trying to voice stories of abuse. It is also not unfamiliar to me.

An excerpt from my notes following the group conversations with Anne, Laura, Linda and Lucy, offers another example, this time demonstrating a sense of movement, connected with our shared goals.

After meditating I notice a sense of aliveness in my hand and fingers, a tingling, an energy, maybe a sense of pace, of urgency, a willingness and preparedness to move.

This stage was important, I think, not only to do justice to the complexity of the conversations we were having and the relationships they represented but also for me to take stock and to connect with my experience of being part of this. It was important not only to 'do research', but to pay attention to how it felt to 'be in inquiry', to notice how I was feeling this, where, when and why, and how this might take me on in my practice. I notice that, since engaging in this, the time and energy I take to reflect on what I bring to therapeutic (and other) conversations has been enhanced. This, in itself, is valuable.

Stage five: stories that 'take us on'... a free writing exercise

In this stage, I again re-engaged in the words from the conversations in a tacit way, not re-reading every word, but (re)visiting my memory of the conversation and how I felt at that time; and my feelings now at this point having read and re-read them so many times.

I do some deep breathing,

I sit,

close my eyes,

pen in hand

and write.

A free writing exercise,

letting my feelings

and the pen

guide me.

This idea is taken from creative writing and storytelling traditions. I had recently attended some creative writing workshops which I had found freeing and helpful, and I was also engaged in storytelling projects. The idea with this exercise was not to get bogged down with what I felt I *should* write which may have taken me to the familiar, the clichéd and the places that silence or restrain me, where my critical voice is at its loudest. I wanted here to trust my intuition and be free to write in a way that perhaps I (and others) may have been unable to in conversation. I imagine, as I did so, that I was engaged in a future forming activity, constructing new stories that may take me (and others) on. I also imagined this would help move me to the next main phase of the inquiry, the writing phase. This connects me with the idea that Ken Gergen (2015) has written about, naming research as '*future forming*', or as a move from '*mirroring to making*'. This also loops back, for me, with Cronen and Pearce's (1999) theories that make up the framework of 'coordinated management of meaning' from where I have borrowed the questions for my conversational inquiry. For me, this is part of 'making' (not looking for) a '*better social world*' (Pearce, 2007). The conversations I was having were part of that co-construction, and it reminded us all of how we contributed to the formation of social justice and 'better social worlds' through the work that we were all involved in. We were forming better *future* worlds.

Here is an example from my notes on the conversation I had with Linda, which speaks to 're-

authoring', 'preferred futures' (White and Epston, 1990) and 'future forming' (Gergen, 2015) as a (still moving) part of her story. My notes speak to the complexity and ethical dilemmas involved in telling other people's stories.

I wonder if it is when Linda meets with other women (and sees through their eyes that she is likable and sees through her eyes how abuse affects others, not just her) that she starts to feel the possibility of healing, of being able to go on with her life, the possibility of living rather than existing. Things are changing for Linda...

...As I tell/write this story I notice that I am grappling with my own responsibilities. This is not my story to tell, but I also feel compelled to tell it... I feel uncomfortable...

Another example is a poem I wrote following a re-reading of my conversation with Janey and Lucy. As aforementioned, I had realised at this stage (at the time of recording) that there had been more going on for Janey at the time than I had known. At the time I was writing, I was more aware of that context and really struggling with my own feelings in relation to this. I was angry, despairing, and struggling to make sense of it, and I was outraged on Janey's behalf. I was encouraged by my cohort to write about it in a different way, by using poetry. So this is more crafted than the other writings, as they are more spontaneous and unedited; but I think this demonstrates another way of writing that is responsive, relational and reflexive. I valued (and learnt from) writing this poem, and sharing it with Janey, who responded in turn, with appreciation.

Reynolds et al. (2014b) have written about poetry as an 'act of resistance', particularly in relation to first person accounts. They highlight the poetry of Bahman, a survivor of political torture who wrote about his experiences and the legacy of those experiences in poetic form in a therapeutic context. I have also worked with people in a similar way. One young woman I am currently working with comes to mind here. She writes passionately and eloquently about the

ongoing challenges she experiences and how this intersects with the labels that are placed on those challenges, how oppressive and de-humanising that feels, how much it 'misses the point'. In a similar way perhaps, this poem *is* an act of resistance, and was therapeutic to write.

Liberation

*Standing in your garden of liberty
Linen layered and leaning in
Close, to smell the subtle
Floral notes of freedom. Listening...*

*The silence that shouted your name
The silencers who played a wicked game
Mere traces of a bygone age
A time that land forgot*

*Washed up on the shore
We were expendable consumables
Anticipating what form we may take next
Shaped by the prevailing discourse*

*Words spoken then as lies left lips
Pursed and shrivelled
Frowns on faces contorted
But we go on unbeaten, resolved*

*Making better worlds makes enemies
Not for us to question why*

*Shame rests with those who cover
the truth. We know not why they lie*

*The old story gathers dust now
We go on with grace
navigating the mirrors and smoke
new life chiselled from the coal face*

.....

I have tried, in this chapter, to make visible the stages of inquiry I followed in visiting and revisiting the transcripts of conversations I had been part of; and to connect this with my practice as a therapist, as well as my developing sense of 'self as researcher'. I have also tried to demonstrate the ethical dilemmas that this kind of inquiry brings forth for the reflexive researcher, which are multiple and complex. I have 'gone to' the uncomfortable places that such an inquiry invites in terms of self-reflexivity, as well as tried and tested (more comfortable) ones.

It would be possible, I think, for the five steps to be replicated and for others to follow in my footsteps if that felt right for them. However, this was not the goal. I did not set out with the intention to *create* a new methodology or a new form of analysis. I set out to pay close attention to or to honour the important things that women shared with me, to be moved by this, and to notice that movement. The five steps were organic in nature, developing as I did, to be responsive to what was happening *within* me as well as responsive to the conversations I had been part of. However I have been able to conceptualise it as a five step model (page 79) which hopefully will support others to either replicate it or to develop it in their own way. The five steps enabled me to take what I felt I had learnt through the conversations, and through my engagement with the transcripts, to inquire *further* into and write about the themes that emerged, writing itself being part of the overall methodology, as the diagram on page 53 indicates.

Act Three

Personal and political stories (of resistance)

Eight women, eight conversations, eight themes

We are moving (in this third 'act') from the description of the 'doing' of conversational inquiry to what was emerging *from* that stage and showing itself or *affirming* itself in the writing and telling. The next chapters are titled/based on the themes that emerged from the inquiry, each theme offering a platform for inquiring into different aspects of practice, and different 'acts of resistance'. I made the choice early on to not just write *what* was said but to use the themes as the titles of important messages that people have shared with me. I would then honour that by using some of the transcripts but also see it as an invitation to inquire *into* these themes and the relevance this has with my current practice. At the end of each chapter, in summing up, I try to pay attention to what I think I have learnt from being part of these conversations and what women have taught me in talking with me about their experiences.

I have also made reference to 'writing about writing' by paying attention to the nature of writing as something in itself that is moving, transformative, the continuation of a story of inquiry. This is part of the temporal frame of the inquiry as I, through this process of writing, make explicit connections between what the women in the inquiry and myself were engaged in historically and the current political and cultural context that I find myself in at the time of writing. I touch base with current news items, current practice examples and my own current *thinking* as a way to 'ground' myself in the context of my practice.

As such, most chapters begin with (or centralise) examples from the conversations I have been part of, making explicit the links between my practice and the themes that emerged from the inquiry. The themes from the conversations were important starting (grounding) points to then

make connections with reflections *on* practice and a reflexive approach *to* practice; moving from the *content* of the conversations to other important contexts to practice, grounded *in* practice. I see this less as a 'grounded theory approach' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to research (which I have been engaged in previously in a local research project) and more of an 'ear to the ground' approach to research, which is also part of the overall methodology. For me, this is a way to connect local and global stories and ways that I connect with the 'personal to the political'.

Carol Hanisch (1970) is most associated with the term 'personal is political', a founding principle of the radical feminist movement of the 1970s and beyond. This has been a guiding principle for me personally as well, as I move from being a listener towards being a 'radical' therapist (McNamee, 2015; Reynolds, 2014). Writing has become surprisingly connected with this movement for me. It is part of how I know that I am engaged *in* something, not just *with* someone. Writing inspires me to notice more and I write about what I notice; and so I am in a recursive relationship that feels sustaining and refreshing. Similarly, storytelling has also become part of my everyday practice and I notice that this 'grounds' me in my narrative therapy roots.

Gail Simon writes about writing as in inquiry, and as 'systemic practice' (2011, 2013), and has framed reading and writing as 'dialogical activity' which has (especially given Gail's position as my academic supervisor) been influential in my own thinking. Hearing Gail talk about the relationship between texts, authors, ideas, inner and outer dialogue etc. as dialogical practice has stretched me to consider how I relate with not only the practices of reading, writing and storytelling, but also how I relate with others who talk about these activities in similar or differing ways. Laurel Richardson (2005) says that she has noticed in her own practice that writing has increasingly become how she makes sense of her world. This resonates for me in a way that I would not have recognised before I began this phase of inquiry. Having started with the idea

that conversation is how I make sense of the world, I can now see writing and storytelling as a form of conversation that has a similar sense-making quality. Imagining a conversation with my practice community as I write is part of that; but it is also how I respond to the ideas that emerge as I struggle for words to somehow define what I am thinking/feeling.

The next eight chapters then each focus on one key theme from the conversational inquiry. They are a reflection of that movement between present tense sense-making that is happening at the time of committing words to paper. It also represents a connection between what I am making sense of now and the process I was part of during the conversations phase, so it is both a reflective *and* reflexive process. Relating with CMM (Cronen and Pearce, 1999) I am noting the context markers that are relevant to each conversation, what we are speaking out of and into, both at the time that we were involved in the conversation and at the time I am making sense of those conversations. The themes (that emerged from this sense-making process) are used as headings, not for the purpose of getting to a 'root cause' of why that theme showed itself, but as a springboard to inquire *into* it in more detail- to think reflexively about how it continues to move me, and the relevance it has in the current, political, cultural climate. Though the chapters are named after the themes that emerged from the first stage of the five-step inquiry, they are also shaped by the subsequent four stages, which took me on in my thinking and reminded me to pay attention to all my senses. In some ways, the writing encapsulated by the following chapters have been *most* influenced by the final 'steps' of the five-step model. I immersed myself in writing in an embodied way; giving myself permission to go where my senses took me, grounded in the dialogues (and relationships) I sought to honour.

Deconstructing roles and rules

This chapter is the first one then that is directly linked to the eight themes that emerged from the conversational inquiry. The themes (as mentioned) came from engaging in the transcripts and pulling out key concepts, immersing myself in them, inquiring into them, focusing on the eight that were most prominent (had the most mention). I have named this first theme and chapter ‘deconstructing roles and rules’, combining the sub-themes of deconstructing language, gender, group ‘rules’ and the role of the ‘facilitator’. Though it was not the biggest theme to emerge from the inquiry overall, it seems like an important starting point as it connects with the conceptual *social constructionist* framework to the inquiry.

Constructing meaning

Sheila McNamee has been a significant influence on how I construct meaning for myself about what it is I do as a psychotherapist. Her work has also been helpful in making sense of my emerging ‘self as researcher’. She says, of social constructionism, that this is best described as “...a philosophical stance that, if adopted, orients us to the world in a relational – as opposed to individualist – manner” (Sheila McNamee, 2017, p.1) Meanwhile, Misra and Prakash (2012) have suggested that it “... reconfigures human discourse in non-foundationalist and non-reductionist ways” (Misra and Prakash, 2012, p.2). I relate to both of these descriptions and offer these quotes as a deliberate act to help ground me (and also you, the reader) in what I think / mean when I talk about social constructionism and deconstruction. They also provide a springboard from where an exploration of the language of social constructionism, as emerged from the conversational inquiry, can begin.

Many of the women I was talking with, particularly those directly involved in the groups, talked of the (social) construction of group and group identity as something that they were part of. This was alongside the *deconstruction* of the language associated with group roles and rules, mental

health, abuse and gender. The construction of class/social status was also explored in some of the conversations, in quite obvious ways, in conversation with my colleague Julia, and in more subtle ways in conversations with others. The construction and deconstruction of the therapeutic relationship was also apparent in some of the conversations. This is most notable with Judy who highlights the role of the facilitator as one that can perturb hierarchy and power; and with Anne who notes that the role of the facilitator has a different relationship to power than one of a 'therapist' or (what she calls) a 'head doctor'. In our conversations (both in our group and in the inquiry) these roles and words were deconstructed in the same way that words such as 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are also unpacked.

These conversations helped me to think about what it was that I was engaged in, how I describe my role, and how I pay attention to (or challenge) assumptions ('rules') about relationships such as the one between 'therapist and client' or 'facilitator and group participant'. Of course, it also brings into question the relationship (and language) of 'researcher' and research 'participant'.

Deconstructing language

In earlier papers (cited in this thesis) I explored the construction and *deconstruction* of the language of victimhood, sisterhood, survival and 'going on'. These had been important themes in the content and process of the group work for women who have been sexually abused, and part of my sense-making process following the group. I was aware (through my own participation) that definitions associated with experiences of abuse had shifted over the time we spent together. In retrospect, I think this was partly an emergent and developing process and partly because of the constructed exercises that my colleague and I introduced to the group which *purposefully* brought language into the open to be discussed, explored, debated and co-constructed between people.

The language of victimhood was an easy place to start, with consensus to 'bin' the word pretty

much from the offset. All of the women felt that this word was not appropriate, not 'enough' to describe their experience or position. We explored the binary nature of the language, with little room for describing the relationship *between* words, or the people/*relationship* that the words attempt to describe. I have always struggled with this particular terminology, and the women in this group felt the same, although others may not. Personally, I can recall times in the past when people have used words like victim and perpetrator and I have literally shuddered. Though I am sure I have used these words myself *professionally* in the past, (maybe now, at times) I think my (embodied) response was/is a *personal* one. I had/have a physiological response to the idea that someone would perceive me (and presumably others) as a victim simply because (at some point in my life) I/ they have experienced what could be described as abuse. As I experience the word victim, in my body, I experience it as a mismatch, and reject it as a clumsy way to define some 'thing' that happened a long time ago. This is, of course, just one example; but it was an important place for us to start as a group of women which then brought ideas of 'womanhood' into the frame; which of course, offers another binary worthy of deconstruction.

A note on deconstruction

Jacque Derrida (1967) is attributed with introducing the concept of deconstruction, which he described as ". . . *neither an analysis nor a critique. . . I would say the same about method. Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one. . . It must also be made clear that deconstruction is not even an act or an operation . . .*" (Derrida, 1991, p. 273)

This has become an influential and important concept within systemic theory and in *practice* (within a therapeutic conversation) and it can have multiple uses and benefits. Paula Boston (2005) says that the "...*practice of deconstruction has been imported into narrative therapy, as a means of offering alternatives to problem-saturated self-narratives and unhelpful dominant cultural discourses*" (Boston, 2005, p. 272).

For me, this has been a helpful 'import'. Unpacking individual, family or community scripts, assumptions and stories (as the women in the group I was part of did) can allow for different and new stories to emerge, through the reframing of previously problem-dominated stories. It also allows for what might otherwise be seen as social 'norms' to be unpacked and challenged. For example, gender stereotypes might be unfolded and brought into question, as might definitions of mental health and ill health. This is important on an individual or family basis, potentially becoming part of a process of (second order) change for family members and for the structure of the family. It is also important at a societal level where discourses of power and inequality can be broken down, potentially destabilising or dismantling the hierarchical structures which hold them.

These kinds of conversations are often transformative on multiple levels, as this example from the conversational inquiry might help to illustrate this.

Lucy *...in the first group there was one client who had enduring mental health (problems) and the group were talking about their experiences and how they would deal with their kind of day to day stuff now and everyone was going 'oh gosh, yeah I do that, you know', or 'yeah, I find that difficult' and this lady said 'I always thought that was part of my mental health' (being hyper-vigilant).*

Leah *And other people were saying 'yeah, I get that'.*

Lucy *And for her, it was that moment of you know... gosh this...it's not a symptom.*

Janey *It's normalising in that context, which is likely to be helpful to her and the way she sees herself.*

This conversation (which was part of the inquiry) is a reflection on a *previous* conversation that had taken place within the group context where we were noticing that being together as a group

enabled new stories to emerge for individuals and for the collective. In this example, taking the time to unpack someone's experience of feeling that she was being followed, and then sharing that with the group led on to the idea of 'paranoia' being deconstructed and challenged as an idea of 'mental ill health' (or deficit) and instead became a shared story of vigilance (a resource) that could be drawn upon to prioritise safety.

Deconstructing psychopathology

When women attend a group within their own community, with other women with similar experiences they are often involved in responsive and *receptive* acts of resistance and experience themselves in solidarity with others. Women speak about their experiences, trusting the other women in the group. They laugh together, cry together, look at each other, use physical contact at times, sensitively and carefully making *intimate* connections based on shared stories.

Being together (in solidarity) in this context is not just personal; it is also political and enables women to deconstruct and then positively connote their experiences of intimacy and receptivity which may otherwise be additionally psychopathologised as 'personality based difficulties', 'unboundaried', 'disinhibited', 'vulnerable to abuse' etc. I have sadly heard all these terms used, with the most degrading and dehumanising language being associated with personality disorder. I have heard people describe a complex relational experience as 'classic PD', or as someone 'PDing'. Now, this really is the epitome of social construction. These words have no meaning without the weight and standing of the tome that is the DSMV, (Diagnostic Statistical Manual) the manual used to assess and diagnose psychiatric 'conditions'. The language would have no currency without it, and yet it is used in often care/less ways to define the behaviour of another person who might be struggling with any number of personal and interpersonal experiences, but who has probably experienced some form of abuse (of power) in their lifetime.

Resisting using this language and challenging people when *they* (inappropriately) use such language is one of the ways that *I* do resistance. One of the other ways is by offering a different frame, one that is humanising rather than pathologising.

I am aware that questioning this use of language in the context of mental health is not a new contribution. Thomas Szasz (1963), Michael White and David Epston (1990), and Sheila McNamee and Ken Gergen (1992) to name but a few, have offered valuable contributions in this debate. In addition the critical psychiatry and post psychiatry movements have been instrumental in challenging subjugating discourses in mental health (see Robert Whittaker, 2002 and Sammy Timimi, 2010, for example).

Deconstructing the language of mental health is an important part of my *everyday* practices in talking with families who have been impacted *by* mental health and associated diagnoses.

Deconstructing the words that *I* choose to use, is also important, for the same reason.

Being receptive to challenge

I have talked about *receptivity* in relation to what I experienced in these groups in different contexts and have received a mixed response. For some, the word does not fit and for some it is offensive. They might argue that the word brings the idea of *uni-directional* abuse into question, and then question whether I am suggesting that the intimacy associated with abuse is reciprocal or that 'victims' are physically receptive towards this dangerous form of intimacy. I understand this concern (and the controversy of the language) but that is not what I am referring to. I am talking about how women might 'reclaim' intimacy and receptivity for themselves when they connect, in solidarity, with others who reach out to them, and accept them, in a way that they might not have experienced before.

Just like ideas of 'resistance' (Wade, 1997), it could be argued that receptivity and the subtly

nuanced skills of relating to others (perhaps *learnt* through surviving the complex relationships inherent in abuse) are often un-noticed, de-valued or indeed psychopathologised rather than being credited as important resources that have enabled women to 'go on'.

Deconstructing resistance

Wade (1997) highlights the commonality in many systemic and narrative therapies that pay attention to pre-existing resources and strengths within the individual. This fundamental principle is key when highlighting acts of resistance and (for me) when working with women in groups. Each person brings their own story of resistance and resourcefulness and this enables stories of receptivity through the connections that are made in being together. This enables and shapes 'preferred' stories and futures (White and Epston, 1990) to be enacted in situ (in the group) and to form part of a narrative of 'going on' *after* the group has ended. Stories of intimacy and receptivity can also be seen as a story of resistance, resisting the dominant story that women who have been abused are 'damaged', 'disinhibited' or unable to form 'healthy' interpersonal relationships. I challenge that idea, and the women who I have spoken with in this inquiry and in the groups that I have facilitated challenge that idea because we were all able to form and sustain such important relationships by coming together as we did.

My experience suggests to me that the group structure (that, in this case, was arguably partly shaped by my own narrative and social constructionist leanings) is *part* of that story of resistance: a challenge to the idea that women who have been abused are 'victims', the *other* to 'psychologically healthy'.

The tension of working within a service that continues to denigrate people by pathologising their experiences for me was/is balanced by the transformation I observe within and between women who attend these groups and learn new ways of being in relationship. It is a difficult balance but one that reminds me of the importance of inhabiting the space between polarities; and the

importance of questioning assumptions, 'norms', binaries, roles and rules; and any language that continues to polarise, silence, suppress or subjugate.

Deconstructing intimacy

An example that comes to mind is a conversation (I had in practice) with a group of women who had experienced sexual abuse, who were talking about their ideas (and worries) about intimacy. It started (as I recall) with one woman taking the courageous step to ask the others if they could relate to what she described as promiscuity. She took a chance by asking others if they had, like her, had a period in their lives when they were drawn to multiple sexual encounters despite their fears about intimacy. This instantly changed the mood and tone of the group and it felt like we were stepping into new territory; quite literally entering into a more intimate space. There was a respectful silence after she spoke, followed by a few women stepping forward (metaphorically) and nodding or quietly saying that they could relate to what she had shared; swiftly followed by some other women offering their solidarity, their compassion and understanding, even if they had not had the same experience.

It seemed to me that this was part of a wider discourse in relation to intimacy and also solidarity. It is also connected to a story of resistance. In mental health services, 'acts of resistance' (Wade, 1997) and 'going on' (Wittgenstein, 1953) are often backgrounded when stories of deficit are foregrounded, in a system predominantly based on individualised notions of health and ill health. This is particularly relevant when working with cultural experiences of oppression felt by whole communities, the systemic nature of which is too often marginalised. Sexual abuse is one of those cultural markers, akin to a 'rape culture' (Buchwald et al., 1995) that continues to oppress those directly affected by the abuse and the wider community by not addressing the power inequality inherent in the act and in society. Coates and Wade (2007) have named acts of violence as both social and unilateral: the act of violence happening between two or more

people within a social context and containing acts of responsiveness between people. In situations of, for example, rape this social act is unilateral (not mutual), in that it is one (or more) person(s) violating another, against their will. Within this there will be acts of resistance *and* acts of responsiveness as part of that complex social interaction.

Responsiveness

John Shotter and Jack Lannamann (2002) have said of social construction, that “...*although occasionally done wilfully, is much more often something that happens to us in the course of becoming an ‘us’. It is something in which we are immediately and spontaneously involved, willy nilly. Construction is an inseparable aspect of the already existing, shimmering dynamic of the ceaseless flow of relational activity within which we are inextricably embedded. When this spontaneous responsiveness is left out, social constructionist inquiry is reduced to a vocabulary for naming the residues or outcomes of social interaction.*” (Shotter and Lannamann, 2002, p.580).

I have heard John Shotter on many occasions talk about responsiveness and I have read papers and books from his vast catalogue that centralise this notion. The idea that responsiveness is inherently associated with social constructionism is one that is not *always* highlighted; but one that I have found myself becoming attuned to, maybe because it fits with my (controversial) ideas around receptivity.

When immersed in this inquiry, I consider I was involved (in an intimate and temporal way) with the words that had been captured and the relationships that they (in part) represented. This is what is usually called a process of analysis, and this language has dominated.

Shotter challenges previously dominant individualised psychological theories that privilege the idea of an inner representational world, requiring processing and analysis. He makes the connection between this dominant thinking and the proliferation of ideas/models that privilege

the notion that the world can be understood by reducing it to its most basic parts, dividing it into sections and subsections and quantifying it the idea of 'truth' and 'fact'.

Shotter's viewpoint encourages us, well, it encourages *me* (as a practitioner and a practice based-researcher) to continually remind myself that I am not searching for a pre-existing truth but that I am part of a movement, with others, that 'brings' *stuff* into being, or perhaps more accurately into *becoming*. When I first handled 'Speaking, actually', John Shotter's last book in a long line of publications, I was initially unsettled by the title. It sounded definite, but I did not know what it was definitively trying to say. Then, after reading it, the title began to resonate. The title invokes (for me) a particular relationship between being and becoming. The idea that in being (together), in communicating, in languaging and connecting, things come into actuality, into being. This, for me, has been part of the major learning from my inquiry. Whilst I might have thought that the inquiry was about the talking with women who I have been connected with in relation to systemic group (this was my intention, and the driving force behind my inquiry), in *actuality* the inquiry has been much wider, moving me on, 'future forming' (Ken Gergen, 2015).

I often have 'future forming' conversations with families about how they access, construct and generate stories about what kind of family they think they are, what resources they draw on, what moves them, connects them and how they go on, despite the challenges that might have 'brought' them to therapy. In these situations, I am also drawing on my own stories of resourcefulness and how I think I relate with others. I am also accessing stories from other families that have helped shape my professional identity; how I construct and *deconstruct* for myself an idea of what kind of therapist I think I am. This is much more in the forefront of my thinking than any theory or paper I have read (or written). The 'doing' of inquiry has been a similar process. I am drawing on all of these interconnected experiences and paying attention to the multiple themes that emerge, including the ones that challenge me.

Deconstructing gender

"Gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced." (Judith Lorber, 1994, p.1).

Judith Lorber suggests that talking about gender is "... *the equivalent of fish talking about water... everyone 'does gender' without thinking about it*". This instantly challenges me, as I tend to think about gender a lot, including my own 'performance' of what I think it means to be a woman. Whilst there is a significant amount of literature in the field of social construction that focuses on gender and sex, Judith Lorber (1994) writes with rigour and clarity which I value even if (maybe especially because) I find it challenging.

Lorber (1994) argues that "...*the status of 'woman' (and its attendant behavior and role allocations) is usually held in lesser esteem than the status 'man' "* (p. 8). This, I find less challenging. I relate with the suggestion that the status of woman is held in less regard than that of man, certainly in many situations; and I have personal experience of having 'felt' less than privileged because of my gender. Many of the women who I have spoken with in this inquiry have experienced the same.

Mary Gergen (2001) suggests that boys and girls are '*socialized into their gendered caste*' and that, as such, girls are more likely to grow into gendered family and reproductive scripts. She also puts forward (what I consider to be) a very valid point in relation to embodiment; one that I have not considered in such a way before. The suggestion is that because women are more likely to describe themselves as '*embodied*' (in contrast to men) that they are also more likely to identify themselves (in relation to their bodies) in more *intimate, inclusive* way (my words), whereas men may talk about their bodies in more separate, distancing terms. This moves me to think about womanhood and bodyhood and the relationship between the two. Jane Ussher

(1989) argues that we need to *understand* the history and social construction of the female body in order to also understand the significance of concepts of womanhood and motherhood, emphasising the impact of reproductive and life cycle changes for women. She argues that women have been subjugated by the *negative* emphasis on their biology and proposes a framework of transition and life stages as more helpful than one of pathology at these times of transition. Paula Nicholson (1998) takes a similar stance in relation to childbirth as a transitional stage within the construction of womanhood and motherhood, which she says should be viewed as a normative transition without the need for pathologising the difficulties that might be associated with that transition. I have previously positioned myself alongside Paula Nicholson in previous work with my colleagues Billy Hardy and Julia Evans (2014) and I continue to agree with her stance, that the needs of women at this stage of life should be seen as transitional rather than medical, a position also taken by Ann Oakley who was extremely influential in shifting existing ideas about postnatal wellbeing.

Many women I have spoken with would agree with this, of having their experiences of tiredness and exhaustion psycho-pathologised; and having their bodies, feelings and thoughts viewed as 'dysfunctional' can be experienced as 'absurd' at best and 'oppressive' at worst. Many refer to the impact of changing body shapes and changing identities when pregnant and after having a baby. Having not had a child, I may not be able to relate to this specific experience but I consider that the construct of motherhood affects those women who have children as well as those of us who do not. This is something that I have often explored in groups with women, and seems to have a different meaning to exploring this in a more intimate one-to-one session, providing space to deconstruct and dismantle medicalised discourses of motherhood.

Personally, I have experienced the pressure of social bias that women 'should' have children. My inner voice (backed up by social bias) questions whether I am fully woman if I am not a

mother. This is one of the personal (and usually private) dilemmas and pressures that many women face and is also part of a wider (more public) discourse in relation to gendered identity and bodyhood.

Having previously facilitated groups for women in the postnatal phase of their family life cycle, these ideas of womanhood, bodyhood and identity have been a significant focus with the group, providing a normative frame of sense-making. As one participant in the group put it: *"It helps me realise that I am normal..."* (in Salter, Evans and Hardy, 2014).

Ann Oakley (1972) has offered a critical view of the dominance of capitalist, patriarchal systems that subjugate women and whose interest is served by a *separation* of gender that positions women as invisible, or 'less than', with women's contributions (including motherhood) being sidelined and overlooked. Put simply, this argument insists that whilst sex *may* be ascribed at birth, gender is a social construction that serves the dominant discourse of patriarchy. In addition, Judith Butler (1990) highlights the 'performance' of gender, making clear the distinctions between sex and gender and also the discursive nature of gender that is 'performed' in relationship with others and with the wider social context.

Developing these ideas, Margaret Simmonds (2012) suggests that beyond Marxist feminist gender theory and postmodern gender theory, 'narrativity' (and an interest in life stories, *autoethnography* and narrative approaches to understanding/making sense of human experiences) may offer new ways for people to story gendered identity, hence contributing to new discourses.

I find this concept of 'narrativity' interesting, in the way it relates to narrative theory and narrative inquiry. As a feminist, narrative informed therapist-researcher, exposing my own stories (however challenging and uncomfortable that may be) is part of a commitment to foreground stories of gendered identity and ensure that my own gendered stories (just like the women I

have been talking with) do not get sidelined or privatised, even (especially) if they are uncomfortable and perturbing. Exploring ideas of gender in groups is also a deliberate act to bring into the open assumptions that are ordinarily unchallenged, and therefore have the potential to sound fixed and unchangeable. It is important, in a group setting, to perturb (resist) that also, so that new narratives can be generated.

Questioning the need for distinct definitions of gender – concepts of ‘womanhood’ and ‘manhood’ as separate to distinctions of male or female – has (as aforementioned) been a challenging idea for me. Having paid significant attention to concepts of ‘womanhood’ in women’s groups that I have facilitated, I struggle to *entirely* ‘let go’ of these concepts in relation to working with women, but I also welcome and appreciate the challenge. Gender theory and queer theory has pushed this (and me) further to question whether a binary definition of gender is outdated in a world that is far more gender fluid.

Vivien Burr says that *“social constructionism bids us to seriously question whether the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are simply a reflection of naturally occurring distinct types of human beings”*. (Vivien Burr, 2003, p.3).

This was highlighted for me recently when talking to some colleagues (Emma and Lucy) who I have consulted with in relation to their facilitation of groups for women who have been sexually abused. They began their group by using some of the material that I had previously used that explores definitions of gender, but they were helpfully challenged (as was I) on the emphasis of gender as a definition by a person in the group who has elected not to be defined by ‘either’ gender, describing themselves as gender neutral. This, in turn, brings the definition of ‘women’s’ groups into question. This makes for interesting dilemmas. I think, for *some* of the women in the groups that I have facilitated, their definition of their own gender had been central. The exclusion of men was also central, I believe, to their sense of comfort and safety and to their

sense of shared identity. To *not* name and pay attention to gender (and gender inequality), for some, could be like not naming sexual abuse. It could, potentially, become part of a silencing discourse. Yet, for others, the emphasis on gender may have a similar polarising experience to the one which I feel when I hear the language of victimhood. For men, who have experienced sexual abuse, this is also, of course, potentially exclusionary and we run the risk of continuing the discourse that women are victims and men are abusers, a story that does ‘neither’ (if we continue within that binary) gender any favours. This begs the question (at least for me), how do we challenge inequality without falling into the trap that there is such a thing as an ‘other’ group, ‘occupied’ by those who experience inequality; whether this be because of gender or any other ‘differential’?

In groups that I have facilitated there are also always opportunities to explore such fixed definitions, and to co-construct definitions that enable people to ‘go on’ in their lives, beyond these thin descriptions.

It is less of an ‘after the *fact*’ (reflective) process (Shotter, 2016 – my emphasis) and more of an emergent ‘meaning-making’ (reflexive, rather than ‘fact finding’) exercise. But does that make it any less intellectual, any less knowledge-based? Shotter emphasises thinking as a spontaneous embodied process that “...*just comes to happen within us, spontaneously, is also shaped by all kinds of unacknowledged influences at work within it*” (Shotter, 2016, p. 131). He describes thinking as encompassing ‘*feelingful thoughts*’ and ‘*thoughtful feelings*’. This reminds me of a conversation a colleague and I had with Nora Bateson in 2015. In this conversation she raised the question of whether there needed to be a distinction between ‘thinking and feeling’. This hung around in me for a long time. I was not sure how I felt/thought about it. What do we think we mean when we use the language of ‘thinking’ or ‘feeling’; how do we construct/co-construct the meaning in our relationships with each other?

In conversation with Judy (who had been part of the wellbeing group in Wales that I had previously co-facilitated), we tried to grapple with some of these ideas. I think/feel that when we were talking about what was happening within/between us, in the group that we were part of together that we began a joint sense-making process. Judy (as a counselling student at the time of our conversation) was wondering about ideas of transference and counter-transference as words to describe the experience of what was happening between people in the group.

'Spirituality' was another word that Judy used, but also partially rejected, as not quite fitting. She was not content with any of these words, but we could not find ones that did our experience 'justice'.

Judy described the group synergy as something similar to 'invisible smoke' that was winding between people, encompassing them, connecting them. We found ourselves 'playing with' social constructionist ideas and asking ourselves and each other if it needed a name for it to be recognised as an experience that we both felt we had had, and we wondered what it would be like if we constructed our own word. Judy chose the word 'candyfloss' and we laughed together at the idea of pink, sticky threads somehow creating a 'web of connectivity'. I shared with Judy the 'fact' that I had previously made candyfloss in my first paid job when I was 13 years old. I found myself spontaneously, responsively sharing a story of how candyfloss becomes candyfloss and the processes involved in making it: spinning, gathering and bagging it for sale. I cannot think of any other time in my life when I have ever shared (or felt the urge to share) this story. It was certainly not what I expected to be talking about in our conversation as part of my inquiry. The outcome of this was that I think we did not just deconstruct candyfloss, making visible the ingredients required to make it a "thing", but we also (I think) deconstructed potential preconceptions of the idea of research and of a researcher.

Arguably, we 'humanised' the interaction between two people who might otherwise be seen in binary terms as 'researcher' and 'researched'. This was not my experience of our conversation,

and I don't think it would have been Judy's, as we talked over custard slices and tea, hugging when we first saw each other, laughing spontaneously through our conversation and 'bouncing' ideas off each other, forming (what Shotter might call) a 'relational understanding'. He quotes Wittgenstein (1993) when he describes this as "*the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we 'see the connections'...*" (in Shotter, 2016, p.84). Judy and I (I think/feel) were both recalling and living connections that have become how we (in part) define our relationship.

In a strange twist, or perhaps a *spin* of connectivity, when I asked my mother to contribute to my inquiry, one of the stories that she chose to share is a family story of gender, which included a story about her daughter working from an early age in a rock and candyfloss shop in the seaside town where her family had lived for three generations. This, I think, is a story of change and difference. My mother talks of her experience as the first girl in a family of men and boys. Her father was one of seven brothers, and she had two brothers. This is a story we share as I am the only woman in my generation on both my mother and my father's side.

My mother's experience of being a girl in her family was that girls were looked after, taken care of, but also 'left out' of many experiences that men may share. As such, she feels that as a woman she was ill prepared for the struggles that would come her way. When she had a boy *and* a girl, she decided to treat them both equally but feels that her son was treated differently by his father and had more (financial) privileges than her daughter who (she describes) made her own way to work, and was financially independent from a young age. She tells this story with a mixture of pride and guilt (maybe even envy), comparing her more protected early years with that of her daughter's enhanced freedom. I do not think that she would have anticipated this story (be) coming to the fore either, but it found its way to paper nonetheless.

My mother speaks of this 'becoming' process in her letter to me. In it, she points to "... *my thoughts jumping about and writing on way...*" and she writes as a bridge between two

interconnected but separate stories. When we talk about it she apologises for this and asks me if it is okay as a contribution, questioning the validity of thoughts that are free flowing, emergent, rather than a record of a set of pre-conceived notions. Of course, I answer that it is more than okay and that it is honest and thoughtful, full of feeling, personal *and* relational. Is this not 'knowledge'?

In isolation, the story might not make much sense at all, or at least may seem somewhat irrelevant, but in the wider story of the social construction of gender (and knowledge), it has currency. Another story from a mother's letter to her daughter, provides more context.

"My brother went to France (school holidays). My adopted brother went to Austria. Me – a girl – couldn't go. It was the norm then so really didn't feel badly. Only as I grew and aged and looked back did I see injustice. So when my son had a jean jacket (bought by his father) and my daughter was refused one, I dug in and struck out and bought her one. Me and their father didn't speak for three days – my punishment from him."

Later, she provides further context to these seemingly unconnected stories...

*"I believed in love, marriage, for better or worse; but I've divorced twice. Does one fight through emotional abuse and be the little woman, the good mother and housekeeper? The woman who 'obeys' her man, no matter what and keeps her promise? So again I see the fight that goes on inside. We were taught the shame of divorce and broken promises... today's generation are far more enlightened. I was brought up knowing I was going to be a wife and a mother. Today, women are brought up knowing there is a **big** world out there and they can do/be whatever."*

To me, this speaks to ideas about gender, constructed, shaped and reshaped over generations, and also perhaps what Stephen Brook (2001) calls a 'growing complexity of femininity' that developed in a post (second world) war Britain (p.774).

Judith Lorber (1994) suggests that we feel socially 'dislocated' unless we are able to successfully 'place' the other person into a defined gender. I would argue that this feeling of discomfort is also associated with a desire to place people into all sorts of boxes, ones associated with socio-economic status, educational status, cultural background etc. We also like to place stories into a time and place, and a context that we can identify with. My mother's story spans the period of the war time 1940s through to today in 2017/18. This is a vast time span, and yet she wonders if she has anything to offer a contemporary inquiry that has centred socially constructed ideas of gender. Maybe this is a gendered story in itself, that many women feel that their stories are inconsequential. This is a narrative that has been highlighted by many, including Michael White (2004), who promoted the idea of 'exoticising the domestic' (borrowed from Bordieu, 1994), and Jane Lethem (1994), in her book, 'Moved to tears: Moved to action'. Here, she highlights the invisibility of women's and children's stories and achievements that go unnoticed in a society dominated by different markers of 'success', ones that are more financially or status driven.

I was in a meeting recently which was made up of systemic psychotherapists, two of whom were women (I was one of them), and the rest of the group were men. I noticed that the other woman and I used practice examples and stories from people we speak with in a therapeutic context as a way of communicating examples of what we do. I noticed that some of the men were using examples from policy and political drivers in how they made sense of what it is that they do. Both seemed important and valid to me, but I noticed that it was the other woman in the group who asked the question as to whether she was contributing something valid. Is this relevant? I am not sure, but it is something that I noticed and it is something that connects me with my thinking/feeling that shapes this writing.

It seems to me that there is strength in questioning the validity of *any* thought/action, as it maintains curiosity and challenges things that are taken for granted. And yet, it is often

seen/interpreted (or maybe just used) as a sign of weakness. As I write this in 2017, political leaders seem to write their speeches (or have them written for them) based on the idea that absolutism is the way to win votes. The last election in the UK was arguably fought in the territory of language and won on the basis of a few key 'buzz' words. 'Strong and stable' was the catchphrase of the Conservative Party, with a strapline of 'I am clear on...' (add anything you can think of; the subject is irrelevant because the emphasis on certainty was the key message).

Living in a world of possibilities and taking a position of multiplicity is seen (by many) as a sign of weakness. This is something we should all be concerned about, to avoid living in what Sharon Blackie (2017) calls 'the wasteland', where we are disconnected from our cultural background, our environment, our intuition. As John Shotter reminds us, *"...we live in a still developing, somewhat undifferentiated, only partially determined, 'fluid' world, within which many turbulent strands of formative activity intratwine – as active participants within some regions of these 'flowing' activities, we can make a difference within them. We can act to make a difference to the structure of the world that would not have occurred if we had not acted."* (Shotter, 2016, p.24). And yet this seems so far removed from what is 'sold' as the 'norm', or the ideal. We have had a whole world constructed for us that bears little resemblance to what we generally call the 'natural' world. This is perturbing.

So, in this chapter, I have been considering the influence of social constructionism and deconstruction on *my* practice as well as in the field of practice in which I work and the world in which I live. Some 'showings' of this theme in my practice and in the conversations in this inquiry have been offered. Emphasising notions of womanhood and motherhood were concepts that I recognise that I encouraged as part of *my* participation in the groups I was part of. This is one of the things I learnt through this exploration. Perhaps this would be one way to measure the impact (power) the facilitator (and their agenda) has on a group and its identity.

I have been able to reflect on this and consider that we were *all* contributing to the agenda and content of the group; and perhaps this co-construction developed more over time as we grew together. This is another important learning point: that groups need time to develop and 'become'; and/but this is challenging given the current 'pressure' on services to be time limited and structured towards specific goals, few of which have anything to do with being part of something collectively.

Recognising that the deconstruction of language was important for the groups I was part of has inspired me to keep challenging my own (and others') assumptions, whether in a group scenario, a professionals meeting or in a therapy session. Being challenged to think about my relationship with gender has also been a significant learning point and I am appreciative of that challenge. It has moved my thinking (and therefore my practices) on, in response.

Doing solidarity***Murmurations***

Heart pounding at speed

I feel the reaches of my outstretched wings

Almost touch another

I sense the fluttering of feathers

And the beating of hearts

Echoing in my blood

We move as one, left, right

Subtle shifts and movements in the air

Swooping down as one

Swift, ferocious

Diving into the unknown

A union in the air

We do not think, we feel the way

Memory living in our wings

And in our mind

We feel ourselves within the flow

We are the way, we know!

Belonging

I wrote this last poem in the middle of the inquiry, in the autumn of 2016. At the time, I was sitting in the window of a rented cabin, looking out at a colourful forest scene and was imagining myself to be one of the birds flying around the woodland. In my head (and in my body) were ideas around solidarity and connectivity. I was, in the moment, feeling connected with the nature I saw around me, temporarily feeling that sense of unity with my environment that Gregory Bateson might call the unity of 'mind and nature' (Bateson, 1979). Nora Bateson (2016) has further explored the inseparable relationship between 'humanity and nature' and I was feeling connected with this thinking, and feeling a part of the natural world around me, something that usually brings me peace and a sense of belonging. I was somewhere *in* this space when I was writing this poem.

As I *re*-read it, however, I am also aware (remembering) that, at the time, I was feeling quite isolated as a person and as a practitioner. I had not long started a new job, and did not at that point have a sense of where I fitted in within the structure of the organisation. I had just moved back to Wales, following four years of living away. I was connecting and reconnecting with people, places, ideas; and indeed, the landscape. I was also on this day spending time with old friends who have always been for me a touchstone, a connection with my home town, my young adulthood, my (then developing) sense of *relational* identity. I had played a team sport (rugby) with them, one way of feeling a 'part of' something, a collective, team identity, a murmuration, *and* a way to resist gendered 'norms'.

As I was sitting, looking out of the window, however, I was feeling much more 'apart from' than a 'part of' this definition of belonging. I was thinking about myself in relation to my shifting identity, moving into a new phase of my life, trying to make sense of myself as a doctoral researcher and a professional in the health service. Where did this fit with my family and culture of origin and

identity? It seemed to be shifting. I realise, as I look back, that the poem was also reflecting *my* yearning for a sense of collective identity, for a fit. I was feeling ‘out of kilter’ not with my *physical* surroundings, the nature that was around me, but with the culture of my home town and the people I love. This was an uncomfortable place to be. I wanted to touch someone’s outstretched wing, and be touched back.

Hiraeth

Lang (2010) writes about the concept (experience) of belonging as a key aspect of social development. He says “...*belonging in small social groups is the means through which human beings experience personal growth, social development, and socialisation and sustain relevance to and influence on the society in which they live, throughout their lives.*” (Lang, 2010, in McMaster, 2016 p.1).

In the *Welsh* language, the word ‘belonging’ would be translated as ‘perthyn’, but the word that is more often used (is more emotionally resonant) is ‘hiraeth’. There is no direct translation to English for hiraeth but it can perhaps be best described as a kind of homesickness that is culturally situated. A better way to story it, perhaps, is as a ‘longing for’ rather than a ‘belonging to’ – or a longing for a ‘Wales’ of the past, of something that cannot be returned to. I have written about hiraeth previously (Salter, 2017c) and (at that time) found many poems, writings and drawings, accessible online that referenced hiraeth. I was also encouraged by the response it received from others when I named it. There is something about hiraeth that moves and connects people beyond the Welsh language and culture. When I was living *outside* of Wales, I missed the mountains, I missed landmarks that gave me familiar reference points for my life and I experienced this sense of longing deeply, this hiraeth for Wales.

Being back *in* Wales, I noticed that the longing I had when I was away was being replaced with a longing *for* belonging in a more intimate *and* relational sense. I was (no longer) missing the

country of my birth, the geography that I was familiar with; I was longing for a sense of *relational* identity, a feeling of belonging to and with others. A hiraeth for something I cannot return to, because I have moved on.

In my everyday practices (not just in Wales), I have had many interesting conversations about 'hiraeth' with families, who often connect with this definition of belonging as being wider than a family context. It is wider than a current feeling, but connected with intergenerational, cultural stories of longing and belonging.

Dion (2000), like Lang, suggests that belonging is a core component in making sense of group cohesiveness, and I agree that belonging is important in the context of group cohesion; but it is also important in terms of relationship and a development of *personal* identity that is invested in (and in relationship with) a more *collective* one.

Groups that are purposefully constructed are often done so around a theme that already connects people. The groups that are central to this inquiry are no different. The one in Wales was a women's wellbeing group, the collective identity being 'womanhood'; and the group in the island community narrowed the connection to 'women who had been sexually abused'.

Attending such a group is already suggestive of commonality, and belonging is kind of embedded into the planning and expectations. One of the roles of the facilitator, as I see it, is to aid that connection and sense of belonging by making connections explicit. For example, in the first week of the group I facilitated for women who have been sexually abused, we used a ball of string to physically represent connections between people and things people had in common. The women in the group (my co-facilitator and I included) are gently encouraged to share (at the level that we are comfortable with in these early stages) some details about our lives and then visually pay attention to how that connects with others, passing the string around to represent the 'web' of connectivity. This introduces a secondary component of physical movement. The

movement towards another person as the string moves around, an almost touching of hands, a physical sign of connectivity. The proximity shifts also. People move closer together to reach out, to extend the amount of connections that can be made before the string runs out. We repeat this exercise at the end of the session as a way to pay attention to the connections that were made *through* being together in the group, and as a way to mark the end of something. The proximity shifts again in the context of ending, and has resulted in a holding of hands in one group, and a group hug in another.

The inquiry has not centred on these subtle movements in terms of its design. I have not visually recorded movement or asked people to recall that. So it could be argued that it is peripheral, but it is also *present* in every conversation and everything I write about those conversations. They are alive in the relationships that this inquiry represents and in the conversations that speak to movement, voice and visibility.

Linda, in our one-to-one conversation, talked about her sense of visibility versus invisibility that shifted through the time that she was in the group. Her experience of not having the sexual abuse she experienced in adolescence validated either by her family or by the legal system, had left her feeling invisible and unheard, which was compounded by the experience of living in a small community. When Linda started to talk about/express her experiences within the therapeutic group setting this was a complex process, one that many of the women shared. Moving 'into the light', to be visible within the community, can be positively transformative but also holds significant risk when you continue to live and work in the community within which you experienced abuse or oppression. In a small community, this visibility can be acutely felt, a 'fish bowl' existence that can mean that mistakes are never forgotten and that past experiences leave more than a mere trace. Residues of shame are closely felt. It would not be uncommon for people to be reminded (in every day talk) of not only their past, but that of their parents,

siblings, cousins. This can make it extremely difficult for people to experience a sense of movement, of 'moving on'.

Linda tells me that when she first came to the group that she attended she was terrified of this visibility but only began to feel able to move on in her own life by feeling 'part of' something rather than 'apart from'. I recall the movement that Linda talks about and remember 'seeing' it. She, as did many other women in the group, began to feel a sense of 'belonging', and this was visible, in the proximity to others and in the space that she (and others) took up in the room. At the beginning of the group, the space Linda occupied was right next to the door. She set explicit boundaries about physical contact – no hugging, no handshakes, no touching, which was, of course, honoured. But this shifted as the connection within the group shifted and ideas about how to 'go on' in life were co-constructed and relationally framed, in and through dialogue.

bell hooks (1994) conceptualises (educational) dialogue as an 'act of freedom' and an 'engaged pedagogy', where the facilitator is sharing in the growing experience, being open to being transformed within the collective frame, to go with the flow. When I am talking about solidarity and collective transformation, I am doing the same; indicating a willingness for the collective to move and be moved; moved emotionally *and* moved to action, myself included. Whilst I might be highlighting what I have learnt through my conversations with women who were part of these groups, I am also sharing what I have learnt about *myself* and my practices, as I am very much part of the collective. I return to the Welsh language where the word 'dysgu' means both to teach and to learn; there is no distinction between the two. They are permanently in relationship, encapsulated by one word, a unity. In this group context we were all learning and teaching, part of an 'engaged pedagogy', a relational flow.

Julia (my colleague in Wales) captures something of this moment-to-moment flow and also touches on the decisions that are made in groups (by all) about what is shared (disclosed) and

how transparency might get re-framed.

Julia You're thinking how might what I share be useful to people, if I share that part of myself, what/how is that going to be useful for the group?... In the same way as it would be in therapy... But it is DIFFERENT in a group cos there's more conversational style... I definitely do say more about myself in a group.

Something similar comes up in conversation with Lucy and Janey, colleagues from the island community, where the word flow makes a comeback.

Lucy Cos I think it's nice to have a bit of structure... but it was also nice to know that it was a bit free and that you didn't have to stick solely to that because... then it feels a bit too clinical, a bit too forced... you know, as human beings we go with what we get, don't we?

Janey Yes, and sometimes you never know when somebody's going to have a moment of new insight and it would be a shame for us to close that down because it doesn't fit with the objectives of the meeting... or session... so you can just go with the flow, can't you?

This speaks to the willingness of the facilitators to be engaged, moved and transformed, part of the relational flow. As Janey puts it, it becomes more 'us' than 'them and us'. I am interested in this idea of 'relational flow'; how do we define this relational experience? How do we know when we are in it? When we have lost it? When we have purposefully shifted the tide?

Ebbing and flowing

I recall a recent conversation (in Wales) with my colleagues following a family therapy session where I was engaged in dialogue with the family and my colleagues were acting as a reflecting team. Afterwards, my colleague asked me, '*how come you changed the direction at that point? What was your thinking behind that?*' In this example, I know I had made an active decision to not continue to follow a particular thread and to move towards another subject. In this case, it

was about checking out safety; but often when I am asked questions like this, I do not immediately 'know' what would be considered an 'answer'. I can usually construct one. Usually though, what I *think* I 'know' is that it *felt* right/appropriate to do so. I had felt my way, with my outstretched wings, tuning into my intuitions, and my 'situated knowing'. This is a significant part of how I (and of course, others) practise, but is more difficult to put into words than describing adherence to a particular technique that has already been named as such. It is a relational and responsive way of being with others; not a manualised way of 'doing' therapy.

In a more theoretical space, John Shotter offers a reminder that this process of 'doing' relationship, of being in dialogue, begins "*...not in our heads, but in the dynamics of the dialogically structured relations within which we are inescapably immersed – the dynamics of our everyday lives together that affect us much more than we can affect them, but from within which everything we do, must initially, be drawn.*" (Shotter, 2016, p13).

John Shotter has been instrumental in not only *understanding* ideas around movement and moment-to-moment interactions, but in *generating* movement; a subtle but significant tidal shift in the thinking that dominates our institutions and our culture. He invites us to think about knowledge as tacit, relational and emergent, and to pay attention to moments that are hard to define, hard to hold on to, hard even to notice; the moment that the tide stops coming in and starts going out. This, for me, speaks to the relevance of making connections between the moment-to-moment movements we are part of *and* a more political view of movement that speaks to wider ideas of change.

"What makes the nature of our efforts and struggles to say something before we actually say it so difficult to describe, is their 'fluid', dynamical, still-in-process nature, the fact that they are always on the way to somewhere else, always in movement, with no clear beginnings or endings, with no clear existence as self-contained and thus nameable 'things'." (Shotter, 2016,

p. 104).

So this moment-to-moment 'stuff' is perhaps what Judy, Anne, Laura, Anna and Linda are talking about when they talk about connection; the unseen or maybe *just* perceptible *interactions* that are bound up in the relationships that are formed, developed and performed in a therapeutic group experience. This is perhaps how the concept of 'flow' relates with the concept of 'connectivity'.

Connection

Judy (as aforementioned) rather playfully, called this 'candyfloss' or an invisible smoke that winds around and binds people. She felt it was almost spiritual. Others have talked about 'sacred' moments in therapy, when (usually) therapist and client feel deeply connected, in a trans-personal/transcendent kind of way (Pargament et al., 2014).

I certainly have, on many occasions, in therapy and in therapeutic groups, felt deeply connected *to* (and deeply in flow *with*) people I am in conversation with, or who I am being with, including all the women named in this inquiry. I have relished those experiences; they are moving, nourishing, perhaps they *could* be called spiritual (as Judy names it). I am not sure, but I know that they often leave me thinking about what was so special about that moment. I tend to think about these moments as 'relational flow' or 'murmurations' (if you will), a collective movement and willingness to explore new places together, to be in solidarity. The addition of 'solidarity' (for me) moves it into a political frame, a frame of action, deliberately positioning myself alongside someone, not just to listen, but (as Sheila McNamee, 2015 and Paolo Friere, 1970, say) as a 'radical posture'. Cantwell and Stagoll seem to have said this for me, when they suggest that "*...such interactive moments are not the product of any casual presence of one person to another, but moments where we experience ourselves as deeply involved with and deeply connected to another.*" (Cantwell and Stagoll, in Flaskas and Perlesz, 1996, p. 129).

Responsive interventions

Of course, in a practice context, this way of thinking/being also requires thought and an element of preparation. In the planning and development stage of the group for women who have been sexually abused, Lucy and I purposefully spent time planning not just *what* we would 'deliver', but also how and where and when; making sure that the group was as accessible as possible, that it had a community location and that the venue was conducive to privacy etc. We also thought about how we would position ourselves as 'facilitators', talking about how we saw our roles, how we might present and support a non-hierarchical structure etc. Most importantly, we also spent considerable time thinking about *why* we were developing such an intervention as a group for women who have been sexually abused. In doing so, we examined the available literature and we examined our own beliefs, biases and intent. The aim was not just to fulfill a need that we had established (through examining the statistics on the island and the statistics from our own department's caseload), but also to make an intervention into the community. To mark that there is a real issue with sexual abuse of women on the island. To mark that this is not acceptable. To mark that women coming together can make a difference to and for each other. To mark that this position of solidarity can generate energy to support others in the community; and to challenge the status quo. This was a political intervention, not just a psychological one. All of the women in the group dialogues spoke of this in their own words.

Linda talked of solidarity as being 'a part of' rather than 'apart from', and as 'strength in numbers'. Anne has called it 'sisterhood'. Laura names it as a 'massive strength' to her whilst she was going through a court case to seek legal justice for the abuse she experienced from her ex-partner. Anna says that *"being with others helped me challenge my own beliefs. It's not our fault"*. She also talks about the shifting power in the group as being part of a change process.

Anne builds on this in our one to one conversation at a later stage, noting that it is not just the

numbers that were growing, but the connection that was developing.

Laura talks about the impact that the group has had on her family and her life outside of the group context. The legacy of her own transformation could be one way to story it.

Laura (the group) has had a huge impact on others as well as me. For example, my daughter has seen me grow, and she is growing.

Anne also talks about this sense of 'something bigger' than herself.

Anne In coming to the group, the unique part was that I stopped seeing myself as an individual and started thinking wider about what people feel and need.

Anne The more we realised it was a safe space... we could see a future... it allowed us to see tomorrow.

Collective transformation

These comments speak to a notion of 'collective transformation' that we were *all* part of and which the inquiry also became part of. I have quoted before (and agree wholeheartedly with) Laurel Richardson (1990) who says that "...*emotionally binding together people who have had the same experiences, whether in touch with each other or not...overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life...(offering) the possibility of social transformation.*" (Richardson, 1990, p.26).

Being in inquiry, beyond the experience of being with women in a group context such as this, has provided an additional opportunity to have conversations with women from different communities. It has shaped a dialogue between practice and research across what otherwise may seem like geographical and cultural divides. This has been another story of connectivity.

Transformation and theories of change

As previously noted, many researchers have suggested that a sense of *belonging* is one of the key aspects in group therapy that is experienced as being effective and relating to positive change processes. The notion of change as something that is ‘happening’ within and following therapeutic groups is (of course) not a new one. Many have written about groups as actively engaged in processes of change and transformation. Yalom, (1985) and Bandura (1977) offer examples of early theories on group experiences as ‘social learning’. Earlier than this, Lewin’s (1951) dynamic model of organisational change highlighted that change ‘in groups’ was easier than trying to target change on/in individuals. I think this raises many questions in relation to who and what defines change, how this is measured and indeed for what purpose. This takes me down a path of thinking about change as part of an agenda of ‘social control’ rather than ‘social justice’. It makes me uncomfortable about the idea of a therapy group for women who have been sexually abused (for example) as being an ‘*agent of change*’. This may lead to think about a group being part of a process of ‘silencing’ or ‘suppressing’ like many women will have experienced from drug taking (either prescribed or non-prescribed) or from medical interventions that have not prioritised ‘voice and choice’.

However, more recent research highlights the efficacy of therapeutic groups as part of a story of ‘*bringing about change*’, something that could be seen more as personal and collective transformation, with many researchers pointing towards group identity and cohesion as part of this story. Some examples include Yalom and Leszcz (2005), Marmarosh, Holtz and Schottenbauer (2005), Barlow and Burlingame (2006), Burlingame et al. (2002), and Burlingame et al. (2011). This cohesion or group identity is often referred to as ‘group-ness’ or ‘we-ness’. (Barlow and Burlingame, 2006; Yalom and Leszcz, 2005; Posthuma, 1996). It might also connect with the concept of ‘witness’ (Shotter, 2006). I have made reference previously (Salter

2015, 2017a) to the notion of 'sisterhood', a word that Anne introduced. She used this word to describe what she felt in relation to being part of a group. Other women (Judy is one) have also used this word, as have I.

Yalom (1985, 2005) asserts that the role of the facilitator in a therapeutic group setting is not only to take responsibility for the structure of the group but to also be attuned to the emergent processes which can bring about change on an individual and collective basis. This is certainly my experience of facilitating groups, and/but I am more drawn to think about this relationally as a kind of 'attunement' rather than 'management'. I also think we (the group) are constantly, collectively embarked on a meaning-making process of thinking about what we think we are doing, not just in terms of content, but in terms of process. In other words, we may be simultaneously thinking about 'what difference is this making for me?' (Is this worth me venturing out for? Will it make me feel better?) *and* 'what difference is this making for others?' (Do I feel a sense of purpose being here? Do I feel connected with my ethical position?).

Ottar Ness and colleagues (2014) researched collaborative practices between 'service users' and practitioners in the mental health field in Norway, and identified three major themes relating to practitioners' experiences of collaborative practices. These included (1) '*walking alongside through negotiated dialogues*', (2) '*maintaining human relationships*', and (3) '*manoeuvring relationships and services*' (Ness et al., 2014, p. 1).

I understand this as a positioning of self (as therapist or facilitator) *alongside* others, keeping relationships in focus and navigating the systems we are involved in. I relate to this but I also notice that I am wanting to expand this to make the connections with doing justice. In this way, collaboration is not just for the benefit of the 'service user', 'the relationship' or the 'service'. It is also part of a much wider objective of creating a better 'social world', where being collaborative is part of a way of being that challenges oppression directly and indirectly.

So, to summarise, whilst the theme of ‘doing solidarity’ may have come from the conversational inquiry, this chapter has also highlighted that this was not an incidental ‘outcome’ of the inquiry but an *intended* ‘outcome’ of the group programmes I have been part of. Whilst these groups were evaluated at the time, this inquiry is not intended to be an extension of that evaluation process, but it has felt important to pay attention to the nature of group ‘belonging’ and how that is in relationship with stories of ‘transformation’, as well as the literature on ‘theories of change’.

It has also been important to speak of the intent of the group to act (not just a community, but) as a political intervention, an ‘act of resistance’. I learnt a lot through my conversations with Anna, Anne, Laura, Linda, Judy, Julia, Janey and Lucy, under this umbrella. I learnt that experiencing solidarity with these women, as I had, was not just important to me; it had been important to them. It appears to me that continuing to pay attention to this in group work programmes that I continue to develop is one way to honour the legacy of these women. Writing about it and encouraging others to pay attention to this important aspect is another way to continue the legacy. Developing interventions that challenge the notion that individualised, medicalised models of ‘treatment’ are important not just to me, but to those who take part. In reflecting on this, it has been helpful for me to revisit more theoretical challenges to the same concept. What I have learnt in exploring the literature in this area of practice is that whilst these theoretical challenges are important (and inspire more direct intervention), it is the ‘doing’ of any such intervention and the (practice-based) inquiry ‘into’ it that contributes to social justice.

Co-constructing preferred futures

If 'doing solidarity' can be seen in terms of movement, 'co-constructing preferred futures' could be seen in terms of vision, bringing that movement into the light.

This next piece of writing took shape in April and May 2017 at a time of political turmoil and a time of unease for me personally. Having just returned to Wales, I was living in temporary accommodation and desperate to find somewhere more permanent. I was also feeling weighted down by the shift in political power going more and more to the far right, and angry about the injustices I felt I was witnessing. It felt like the whole world had experienced movement and was waiting to see how a hopeful future may emerge from what seemed like a bleak time. I think my own sense of instability (coupled with the political instability) at this time comes through in the writing as I struggled to stay hopeful, and to connect with the hope I felt for the women I was talking with. This was coupled with the despair I felt for the ongoing oppression of people internationally and collectively.

If I had the authority to construct and offer a preferred future to the world, it would include a vision that ends violence (including sexual violence) against women and girls, and ending the culture that appears to condone it. We all construct preferred futures, some that are *outward* looking, some that are much more personal, intimate, and many of which are *overlooked*. Sometimes the gap that we notice between our present experience and that future vision can be too vast, and the vastness can bring distress and dis-ease. Sometimes though, a glimpse into the future can be utterly transformative.

Preferred futures then, it seems, can seem tantalising and alluring or mad-making and based on fantasy. In this chapter, I am thinking not just about preferred futures in the way that Michael White and David Epston (1990) put forward the concept – as a scaffolding for important conversations that speak to movement and are not defined by deficit. I am, as well, thinking

about everyday stories of justice and injustice, at a *local* level, *and* I am thinking about how the society in which we live (and the dominant discourses of said society) may subjugate, squash, hush or batter to death the chance for some new stories to flourish, at a *global* level. I am thinking also about how I/we might be part of creating a 'better social world' that notices, points at and seeks to change that injustice, so that they are no longer overlooked.

Janey, in conversation with Lucy and I, talks about her commitment to a 'better social world' and how she has been part of 'doing justice' in her workplace, as a nurse and then later as a researcher.

Janey *I remember when there was a GP here who sexually abused some of his patients – adult patients, vulnerable adult patients – and when myself and a couple of my female colleagues were instrumental in going to the GMC (General Medical Council) and then later on he re-offended; but I remember all the 'crap' that we were faced with. We went to them and said 'look, this man is dangerous, he's a perpetrator'. They just labelled us as 'raving feminists'.*

I remember in this conversation how we all sighed at this point, a collective exhalation and expression of the frustration we all felt. We weren't in disbelief, because we are not that naïve; we were in *despair*. We had all heard these stories before. It sounded depressingly familiar.

I wonder though if, instead of sighing, we might have shouted 'What? That is unbelievable. What the hell is wrong with this place?' I wonder what that might have felt like, what that might have led to. But this also comes with risk.

Janey *... It's not easy... when you do have the courage to stick your head above the parapet, you have to take a lot of flak.*

What followed instead was actually a more hopeful story, one that maybe speaks to preferred futures. Janey told us of another more recent story that *had* been investigated by the

appropriate authorities, in a more timely fashion.

Janey Maybe the tide is changing... and maybe it's a better time to bang on a drum...

It was this noticing that perhaps led to feeling like it was the right time to openly question the amount of abuse that women were experiencing on the island we were living on. This follows on from the recognition of the impact of sexual abuse on women (locally and globally) that led to the group being set up in 2014.

Anne, a founder member of this group, and current advocate for women talking with other women about their experiences, reflected with me about how the group (a sense of collective identity) played a part in her own future forming narrative.

Anne ...It opened up different areas of our mind, and also opened trust, because in the activities we also shared what we want to be, how we thought we were... we all took turns to talk and say how we feel and the more we spoke, the more we realised it was a safe space... we could see a future. It allowed us to see tomorrow and not just today.

This moves me. It seems that Anne is noticing that by talking about the past, the legacies of the abuse that the women had experienced, but doing so by coming together and experiencing solidarity as women, led to future possibilities coming into view, and becoming possible. Laura seems to suggest that there is growth and movement towards a different future on both an individual and a collective front. Linda also spoke of something similar; she told me how important it had been for her to meet with the other women in the group, and how this had been part of a movement, for her, to loosen the grip of shame.

Linda ...It's just so nice to know others... My God, somebody else is like me... it resonates. I feel part of something... we are women who have come together. We need to be seen publicly as a group, not hide away...

There is another story of preferred futures that Linda speaks to. In our conversation she speaks of a move towards prioritising her safety, wanting to begin investing in herself, taking her life seriously. This is new territory, which Anne also talks of, very directly. She also, like Linda, talks of taking herself, her life, and her safety more seriously.

Anne I set out to kill myself and sat out until daylight but I was able to snap out of it. I write things about what I want after my death, not just for me, but what I wish the world would help people with... IF I do this. It's not easy, but it's my fight and I WILL do something about it. I have more strength to do that now... It used to happen all the time. Now it is very, very rarely and not for a long time. The group helped me to not fall in the hole. Sometimes, it just takes one call from family to take me back to thinking about killing myself... before I couldn't think, but now I can think that everything I feel passionate about and want to change in the world would disappear. So it's given me a lease of life, cos there are others who need help.

This is important talk about a future that perhaps was not in view before, a preferred future that speaks to living, and to purpose, the purpose to be part of a 'better social world'. When I have these kinds of conversations in my practice as a psychotherapist, working in mental health services, I always consider myself privileged to bear witness to (and be part of co-constructing) narratives of preferred futures that frame living as a *choice* that is becoming easier to make.

A young woman I am currently talking with (in Wales), has recently recorded a digital story that illustrates how (for her) finding her voice through (family) therapy enabled her to see a future for herself and to start making plans for living rather than plans for dying. She is bright, articulate and extremely creative, skills that have come to the forefront in this venture. Her story is an extremely powerful story, and one that she has bravely chosen to share with others. It is both a unique and personal (local) story and one that offers a more universal (global) message of hope. She tells me that she is finding more reasons to live through being *part of* something that

speaks to others, that offers her both a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose.

When women talk about choices they have made to *not* live, in a post-abuse frame, this is multi-faceted. More often than not they talk of their personal (local) story of) anger alongside the despair they feel that abuse continues and that *other* women (globally) have experienced the overwhelming sadness, distress and disconnect that they have. When women develop stories for going on, these stories are also not constructed or told in isolation. A sense of solidarity with other women, and a shared purpose and goal, helps to shape stories (and narratives) for living, as Linda and Anne have demonstrated.

A gendered narrative?

Recently (in May 2017), I was in conversation with a woman I supervise who works in the voluntary sector providing counselling for adults in the local community. She told me that the organisation she works in was noticing a growth in women accessing the service who were experiencing unspecific discontent and distress. Of course, I was curious; I work in the same community and also have conversations with women who express a discontentment in their relationships, their work, their lives. I feel it myself. So do my friends. I wondered, with my conversational partner, what this was about.

Experience suggests to me that when people perceive a gap between their everyday reality (the story lived) and their preferred reality (the story told) then this leads to distress, to various degrees. At present, in the UK, the gap between expectation and reality seems so vast that an increase in distress is maybe to be expected. It is, arguably, so vast that we can't even see it as a myth. I can understand why so many women would seek out conversations about their lives, their hopes and their losses in such a context. To have a witness to their story may in some way puncture a small hole in the bubble.

I wonder what it is like for us *all* to live in a time where the myth of equality is so pervasive, to live in a time and place (in Britain) where we have a female prime minister that perpetuates this myth. How does this translate if you are a woman living in a Welsh valleys community? Or an inner city housing estate? Or a rural, isolated community? Claiming benefits that barely pay the bills and have just been reduced following a review of your situation that suggests it is apparently not as bad as it was last year. You are less disadvantaged now, it seems, according to this review, but you have felt the opposite. Food bills have gone up, utility bills have gone up. The men in the community where you live are either unemployed or fearing unemployment as the future of industry looks more and more bleak. I have worked in Welsh mining towns, industrial towns and communities like this since the 1990s and I have often heard phrases like 'men are men'. Genders are distinct, or so the myth goes. Women often *have* defined roles (defined *by* their roles) as mothers, housekeepers, the people who look after the children, their 'man', the older generation; and this often goes unquestioned.

Hyper-normalisation

When people enter into therapy, or into a therapeutic group, they are often 'saturated' or weighed down with multiple stories of the past (gendered or otherwise) and full of 'problem talk' (White and Epston, 1990). Laying foundations for future talk enables some movement away from those potentially fixed and depleting stories, but that does not mean that these problem stories do not get heard. Bearing witness to the legacy of abuse and other markers of oppression and trauma is also an important part of what I do, as a systemic psychotherapist, as a family therapist and as a group facilitator. It is also present in my work as a supervisor and as a practitioner/researcher.

When I was talking with my own supervisor, Billy, about the kind of stories I was hearing (in the summer of 2017) and my own frustration at the 'myth of equality', which I feel as an embodied

response, a shudder, a skin prickle; he wondered if what I was experiencing was perhaps an ‘allergic’ reaction to hyper-normalisation. I became interested, and looked into this a bit more. Coined by Alexei Yurchak (2006) in his book *‘Everything was forever, until it was no more: The last Soviet generation’*, the concept has found a new audience following the screening of Adam Curtis’ (2016) film named ‘Hyper-normalisation’. In the film, which is a compelling and perturbing view, Curtis argues that since the 1970s, governments and financial systems purposefully shifted the emphasis on politicians as governors of the complex ‘real world’ and instead constructed a ‘fake world’ run by corporations/financial systems that was/is kept stable by politicians. It has, by some perhaps, been adopted as a catchall phrase for describing a phenomena whereby we experience living in a time and place where the ‘fakeness’ of the constructed world is no longer seen as fake and is experienced as ‘normal’ and therefore ‘unquestionable’. It is treated as if it were a natural (and therefore unchangeable) state rather than one that has been constructed and maintained.

I am not sure if this is exactly what my metaphoric ‘allergic’ reaction was about, (and I am someone who has very real allergic reactions) but it certainly resonated for me. Noticing this may bring its own dis-ease.

Talking sexual violence

It made me wonder about what it might mean for women who have been sexually abused, raped, sexually assaulted, intimidated, or have experienced violence because of their gender, to live in a country where the message that is propagated is that we live in a culture where women are treated equally to, and have the same opportunities as, men. I recall a conversation from practice that speaks to this. One of the women brought into the group (for women who have been sexually abused) an article that she had cut out of the local paper that had the headline ‘rape is rare in (our community)’. As a woman who had been raped by her intimate partner, she

took the decision to write back to the paper to offer a different view. This was following the legal system 'dropping' her case that she had taken to the police as there was a) no precedent for a 'marital rape' case in the community and b) because she had sought support from mental health services due to the trauma she experienced and therefore would not be seen as 'reliable' enough.

She wrote an article that highlighted that whilst stranger rape might be 'rare', it *does* happen in island communities, as it does in other communities; and other forms of rape and sexual violence are also happening within relationships, often invisibly so, and probably not being reported to the level that they are being experienced. This was clearly a brave move given that she was still living in the community where her ex-partner was also still living. She used a pseudonym at the suggestion of the group who were concerned for her safety, which was a good decision, but it raises the question of how small and large communities can be defined by particular stories that are constructed for and by the community, with that same maintenance of power as the highest context marker.

"We live in a culture that condones and celebrates rape" – bell hooks (1995).

"The awfulness of being a female writer is that you know that you will not write about rape just once. There will always be terrible new outrages to respond to; another extraordinary story to make you simultaneously fearful and furious for your daughters; for yourself." – Caitlin Moran (2016).

Local to global connections

Caitlin Moran, a feminist columnist and author, brings to our attention in her column in 'The Times' in 2012 (and in her book, in 2016) the shocking case in India of a young woman, Jyoti Singh Pandey who was violently raped on a bus by six men. She died of her injuries following a

brutal and sustained attack. The solicitor (says Moran), who represented three of the accused in an interview during the trial, said publicly: 'Until today, I have not seen a single incident or example of rape with a respected lady'. He then, Moran tells us, went on to blame the victim and her partner for travelling on buses late at night. He sold the lie that she was 'asking for it'.

Moran responds with: *"The awful issue of victim-blaming the injured is what makes rape so iniquitous – like telling children in care that they should simply have picked better parents in the first place. Why does this happen?"*

This sounds like a good question to ask ourselves and others. Why does rape/sexual abuse happen? And why, when it does happen, do we look at the victim for the answer? Why are we not looking at the men who rape and abuse and the society we live in? And why are we not nearly as outraged as we should be?

I was watching the television a few months ago and heard a male reporter reading a breaking story that a British woman who had been travelling in Australia had gone to the authorities after being subjected to rape, violence and enslavement by a fellow traveller who had offered her a lift. The male reporter said that this woman had been held hostage against her will, raped and EVEN had her passport taken off her. Later, he said that she had been held hostage, raped, and EVEN on one occasion been held by the throat until she passed out.

What got my attention was the innocuous use of the word 'rape', casually sandwiched between being held hostage and having your passport stolen, both of which seemed to warrant more emphasis. I *do* understand that having her passport taken had the significance of keeping her hostage but how come having your passport taken, or being held by the throat warrants an 'EVEN' with emphasis, whereas rape barely gets a mention? I couldn't help but wonder that, if this male reporter had ever feared or experienced rape himself, whether the word rape may have had a different emphasis. Maybe this is too simple an argument but these simple

messages are enticing when it comes to rape and sexual abuse. It *is* a story of complexity BUT it is also *simply*, not okay. One in five women will experience sexual abuse or rape in their lifetime. Seventy per cent of women in mental health services in the UK will have experienced it. It is vast and invisible (NHS Confederation, 2008).

Maykao Yangblongsua Hang (1995) asks the question: *“What visible and invisible barriers must be identified and overcome to bring equal value to women? As people like myself start to peel the layers and challenge the belief system, we are stamped as radicals. So be it.”*

(Maykao Yangblongsua Hang, 1995, pp 204).

‘What visible and invisible barriers must be identified and overcome?’ I find myself asking a question like this to myself and others constantly. Sometimes, the question throws back helpful answers that speak to preferred futures, and helps me to practice ethically. At other times, it feels like a rhetorical question that will never receive an answer big enough or bold enough to do the question justice. If I look to the past, I am overwhelmed by the injustice but my outrage gives me comfort when I feel saturated in sadness and despair. If I look to the future though, I imagine myself as a woman who can (in solidarity) lend and add my voice to other women like Maykao, to be part of a practice community that challenges what has been accepted as normal.

Doing non-violence

Working with couples who have taken the step of paying attention to violence in their relationship, I have been influenced by (and positioned myself alongside) people like Virginia Goldner (1998, 2004) who offers a clear and workable approach for working with violence, backed up by a multi-dimensional theoretical model that advocates for multiplicity; thereby dealing in (what could be defined as) a straightforward and straight talking way within the complexity of intimate partner violence. I have tried to do the same in my approach to rape and sexual abuse in the groups that I have facilitated. Though I might (as Anne says) look people in

the eye and tell them *simply* that it's 'not their bloody fault' (Anne's experience of the message we gave), this is within the context of an appreciation of the *complexity* of the multi-faceted and intimate relationships that are rendered invisible by the definition of abuse and rape.

Madhubuti (1995) in a chapter entitled 'On becoming antirapist' (in 'Transforming a rape culture') proposes that part of the cultural change is for men to accept his (and others') invitation to see all women as female relatives. He says that if men think of women as their sisters, their mothers, grandmothers etc., then they would ask themselves the question 'would I rape my mother?', and extend that to 'why would I rape any woman?'. He makes a call to men to not just 'not rape' but to be '*antirapist*' in their attitude towards rape. This is another simple message, and I am not sure that I can fully embrace the simplicity here or agree with the concept of encouraging men to consider if they would 'rape their mother'. But I think that all men *and* women have the potential to be 'antirapist' rather than 'simply' *non*-rapist in their challenging of subtle ways in which women are treated and how sex and gender can get conflated; and that this has some potential as a way forward.

It could be then aligned with the movement towards non-violent resistance (NVR) which has forged a pretty close relationship with the systemic community. Haim Omer (2004), Peter Jakob (2017) and Liz Day (2014) have written more about how this movement has developed from Gandhi's and Martin Luther King's peaceful protests through to the adoption of NVR principles in specific therapeutic practices with families and/or communities; advocating for non-violent responses to violence and aggression. Liz Day (2014) says of NVR that it is part of an action, or a '*moral imperative to challenge and bring about relational change*'. Within this context, 'acts of resistance' are varied, unique and personal but also part of a wider story of action and transformation.

I often use this model when working with families who are struggling with power imbalances, a

lack of parental presence, and violence in the family. It is a helpful concept that people can hold onto in turbulent times. A mother I was talking with recently whose daughter (diagnosed with an eating disorder) had been hitting her on a regular basis described the usefulness of such a model as something that kept *her* calm and gave her emotional strength which enabled the situation to *feel* calmer. Her daughter agreed and has been committed to be non-violent in order for things to be different in their family. *Doing* non-violence was something the whole family signed up to, for that purpose.

Doing *non*-violence could easily sit next to doing *anti*-rape from a wider cultural shift to specific practices that could be seen and named in a therapy room, for example. Outside of the therapy room, bringing these issues into the light through public dialogue, community interventions and media coverage is also part of the movement.

Narrative approaches

“As human beings we learn a great deal from re-telling stories, creating new ones and deepening existing ones” (Etherington, 2004, p.55).

“...new selves form within us as we tell and re-tell our stories” (Etherington, 2004, p.9).

Narrative therapy, most associated with Michael White but inclusive of many contributions, including White and Epston (1990), Freedman and Combs (1996), Michael Durrant and Cheryl White (1990), Denborough, and Freedman and White (2008), encourages me to pay attention to the ‘transformative’ nature of storytelling, and how this can become ‘future forming’ (Gergen, 2015). In the context of group work with women, I consider that I was part of storying lived and experienced in and through relationships. Narrative therapy pays attention to the ‘witnessing’ of those stories (White and Epston, 1990) which may be a reflecting team in a family therapy context, a co-constructed group of peers in a group therapy context, an audience, or a reader.

In this context, 'witnessing' is not at all a passive act of observation but a dynamic act of hearing, reflecting and reshaping stories, co-creating a space where new and evolving stories can emerge.

When working in groups, this sense of creating space (where stories can be heard) is a central one. In this space, where there is no delineation between audience and performer, stories are shared and 'preferred futures' (White and Epston, 1990). Stories of action are generated, shaped and changed through the feedback they receive; through the relational context of the storytelling experience. Michael Durant and Cheryl White (1990) highlight how dominant stories can prevent people from accessing their stories of resourcefulness. They tell a story of Alice, who was sexually abused by her grandfather and physically abused by her parents, who has been influenced by family stories that she was 'emotionally disturbed' which had become a dominant narrative that she carried around with her. They offer this as a (local) example of practice that speaks to a (global) challenge of narratives that sustain the kind of power that can maintain and invisibilise abuse.

"... dominant knowledges which influence women in constructing their personal stories are patriarchal ideology and the whole area of psychiatric ideology and classification. These are the linguistic and epistemological contexts in which incest has traditionally been located." (Durrant and White, 1990, p. 22).

The relevance of 'narrative' in a research frame

In a *research* context when thinking about narrative as a means of inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (2013) refer to the significance of the relationship between inquirer and participant as a catalyst for emerging stories that are part of developing a sense of community and empowerment. For me, it is about how ideas of self (and self in relation) evolve in dialogue with others and how the stories we tell ourselves and each other about this process begins to define

us; and the cultures in which we live. This is the relational space from which preferred futures can emerge, and this is what I observed (and was part of) in the group work with women *and* in the research that followed. We were not just ‘sharing’ stories and legacies of abuse; we were *co* and *re*-constructing narratives of ‘going on’. This is inherently political.

So, I hope I have been able to illustrate in this chapter how the theme of ‘preferred futures’ was not just evident in my conversations with women within my inquiry (as per the excerpts offered), but also how this theme was evident in the groups themselves and in the lives of the women who were part of them, myself included. It is also evident in my current work context and connects with the stories that are propagated in our communities. I have learnt much through reflecting *on* that and inquiring *into* it, in more depth.

Not only can I (from being immersed in this inquiry) now see the possibility of change towards ‘better social worlds’, (which examples such as the “#MeToo campaign can spark); it has also ignited hope for me, on a personal and professional level. At times, when I question whether ‘doing therapy’ is the required response to these kinds of social problems, when I find myself thinking that therapy is a social construction (McNamee and Gergen, 1992), created and sustained by systems that oppress, I am also able to draw on the personally transformative experiences within this inquiry. These remind me that the kinds of interventions I have been part of are meaningful for people and can contribute to ‘preferred futures’. This is a significant learning point. If I can continue to notice this potential for positive transformation whilst *also* continuing to question and challenge the potentially oppressive systems that I (we) work within, then I think I can maintain and sustain that position of hope. If I can write about it, this may also inspire others to maintain hope. Understanding how this fits within a story of legacy, the legacy of abuse, and the legacy of the abusive systems that people find themselves in is part of this story and is explored in more depth in the following chapter.

Going on from legacies of abuse

'Blowing the lid' – a short story

Whilst on the island there was hush all around. People going about their business with eyes protected by high spec sunglasses, ears guarded by expensive hats. This is how they/we went on.

There might have been a lid-blowing moment then, but not a full force hit. This would have to come after, after the boat had sailed. There were maybe some small, controlled explosions, barely scorching the earth around the epicentre, quietly smouldering with not enough energy to taste, smell, feel it.

It was like I was looking in, like a child at a sweet shop window, pressing little hands and nose against the glass, steaming it up. I could see inside, see the possibility, imagine the taste, but held back behind an invisible shield. Just like this child, I was an outsider, looking in. Yet, even as an outsider, I felt stuck. Stuck inside a contradiction. Desperate to get out and yet compelled to stay. Seduced.

The stories I heard, the stories I lived, were ringing in my ears, surging through my veins, finding a place in my body, as if I were a host. I had to hold on to something. It was making me dizzy. I told myself that I had to learn how to keep something back for me, to look after myself, protect my core, but I didn't want to be guarded. I wanted/needed to be open, to be able to hear what others were pretending not to notice. This was how I could feel different/more ethical/less collusive. My last conversation with Linda was finding its place in me.

"I had to keep a bit of myself back, squirrelled away, hidden from everyone. I cannot expose that last little bit of me."

I pictured a pale-skinned girl, previously hidden from the world, stepping out for the first time,

overwhelmed by the beauty around her but terrified of the light that shone down. Light, so precious and life-giving and yet dangerous to the unprotected. I was wishing I had on those designer shades and a wide brimmed hat, some shelter.

I imagined all the women I have been talking with as providing some sort of collective or connective canopy, keeping each other safe, surviving as a collective, cooperative system, each person 'stepping out' when it feels right for them, and then stepping back in to be supported by the others when that felt right. A murmuration.

Maybe it's not the right time for me to step into the light. Maybe I am too connected to the collective for it to be safe for them. The repercussions may not be felt by me alone.

I need to get out. I need to reconnect with others. I need more light. More space.

And so I did.

Get out.

And now I can look back and step back, no longer pressed against the window. I see a bigger picture.

Now reconnecting with others, with family and women who I have shared history with, who I love. I used to play rugby. A team sport. And another way to do resistance. My team mates are my closest friends. They welcome me back. A team hug. A different kind of canopy.

'What goes on tour, stays on tour', we used to say.

Not this time, I hear myself say. Not this time.

.....

"The stories we've been living by for the past few centuries – the stories of male superiority, of progress and growth and domination – don't serve women and they certainly don't serve the

planet. Stories matter, you see. They're not just entertainment – stories matter because humans are narrative creatures." (Sharon Blackie, 2016 p. 13).

The story above represents *one* kind of legacy of abuse. An abuse of power. As I look back I recognise the kind of system I was working in, living in. One that silenced. It is an important story for me to tell. As someone who has experienced this silencing before in my life, I also recognise that I can see it, but I can also be frozen by it, get gripped by it.

Exploring legacies – the tree of life

David Denborough (2008) writes about using 'the tree of life' as a metaphor, or an opener for people to share stories about their lives, to tell their truths. This idea has been used in many different scenarios, in health and in social care, and has been a common approach within popular education. Denborough references Sally Timmel and Anne Hope (1984) as the source for his discovery of the metaphor, and Timmel and Hope reference Paulo Freire as their influence. (Denborough, 2008, p. 72). I discovered it via David Denborough and have been using it for many years in individual therapy and in groups.

In 2015, I had been doing research for a presentation I was preparing to deliver on group work with women when I stumbled across a report from a women's group in Elizabeth, Australia. They were using the tree of life metaphor, not just *in* their group (like I had done); they were using it to *model* the group. It was not just a technique to try out in one session but it gave *life* to the group. It was interesting to me given that we had been using the metaphor of the aspen tree within our group.

In the report on their group, I have taken this quote:

"We are like the tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burnt, but inside the tree the sap is still

flowing and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree we have endured the flames and we still have the power to be re-born.” (Tree of Life Women's Group, 2009–2010)

The group that I was part of used different kinds of metaphors to describe what might be seen as a similar process, which speaks to legacy. They called it the ‘butterfly effect’, and one woman (Anna) likened it to a hot air balloon. *“We are the fire. We’re getting higher because we’re sparking off each other.”*

Laura described it eloquently as being like a jigsaw puzzle. At the begging of the group (she says) it felt like her life was like a ‘baked beans’ puzzle where all the pieces look the same and so you don’t know how to make it into a whole. By attending the group she felt this changed; like the corner pieces of her puzzle were put in place which enabled her to rebuild her life with some kind of reference point.

I thought this was a smart and creative metaphor. The group are working together now to create a legacy for other women, so that they can offer the support to others that they feel *they* should have had, support from other women who have shared experiences. It is interesting that fire is mentioned in both these quotes and is also linked to the name of the group that I had previously set up which was the ‘phoenix’ group. It is also associated with the aspen tree (that gets burnt back but lives on), which is the name and metaphor we have used.

The tree of life provides a template for thinking about the legacies that have influenced our lives and the legacies we leave behind us. It offers movement, between places and between times. However, it also speaks to centuries-old connection between people and the earth. It offers a connection that we often forget about in western society. *A legacy of connection.*

Historical context

“This is the world in which I move uninvited, profane on a sacred land, neither me nor mine, but

me nonetheless. The story began long ago... it is old. Older than my body, my mother's, my grandmother's. As old as me, Old Spontaneous me, the world. For years we have been passing it on, so that our daughters and granddaughters may continue to pass it on. So that it may become larger than its proper measure, always larger than its own in-significance. The story never really begins nor ends, even though there is a beginning and end to every other story, just as there is a beginning and an end to every teller." (Trinh T. Minh-H, 1989, p.1).

"Before there was the Word, there was the land, and it was made and watched over by women." (Sharon Blackie, 2016, p. 7).

This sounds very much like something Anna said in the collaborative inquiry some 28 years after this quote from Blackie.

Anna (the group) gave us an opportunity to grow as people.... Like ears, we never stop growing. The more we grow as a group, that's growth in itself, and helps other people to grow, and others and others... It's like a butterfly effect... We are always evolving.... If there was a hot air balloon above us, we are the fire. We are getting higher because we're sparking off each other...

It is interesting that Anna mentions the human body and the natural world in her use of metaphors, as does Sharon Blackie, as does Trin Min-H (above and below).

"And if we rise up rooted, like trees... well then, women might indeed not only save ourselves, but the world." (Sharon Blackie, 2016 p. 19).

For me, these quotes offer a reflection on not only human legacy but the legacy of the land, the earth, our shared legacy. They make explicit the connection between culture, landscape, bodyhood and gendered identities.

Sharon Blackie takes this further and raises the question of how violence against women has

been part of a historical view of women as some ‘thing’ not to be trusted, backed up (she says) by two thousand years of sacred texts that promote subordination. Amongst this exploration of our/her gendered legacy, she also tells a much more contemporary story that resonates for me on a personal level.

“My mother, as a tiny child, picked up a poker from the fireplace and held it up to her father to stop him beating my grandmother. A couple of decades later, at just about three years old, I took hold of my own father by the kneecaps and pushed him, step by astonished step, out of the room to stop him hitting my mother.” (Sharon Blackie, 2016, p. 6–7).

I have a similar story to tell, although I was a lot older than three years old. I was a young woman, trying to make sense of the world.

My mother’s partner, not my father.

Is drunk, angry.

He threatens her with a knife.

My mother.

I intervene, using my body to get between

Knowing my own strength,

My mother is unhurt,

But our relationship damaged (for now).

The police take him away.

To bring him back the next day.

A short time later, I leave home, to make my own way.

Certain the world is not always a safe place.

.....

“I come from a line of strong and brave women – but I grew up feeling that the world was not a safe place for us.” (Sharon Blackie, 2016 p. 7).

Sharon Blackie, a psychologist, mythologist and storyteller, tells the story of the wasteland, a story deep rooted in mythology (Arthurian legend) but relevant for us today. She argues that we are living life as if in a wasteland, disconnected to our environment and disconnected with the plight of the earth and its people. We carry on our lives, she suggests, regardless of the suffering and destruction around us. This could be seen as a relational crisis, surviving in a (neoliberal) society that is steeped in more recent traditions of materialism and individualism.

What is that sound high in the air

Murmur of maternal lamentation

Who are those hooded hordes swarming

Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth

Ringed by the flat horizon only

What is the city over the mountains

Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air

Falling towers

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

Unreal

From 'The Waste Land' (T. S. Eliot, 1922)

.....

In contrast to the idea of a 'waste land', the tree of life metaphor reconnects me with more earthly, spiritual *and* human relationships and with intergenerational stories of connection. The different words on the tree of life speak to multiple relationships, relationships with those who have been before us and those who will come after us, and with the earth itself. It allows space to think about the legacy we will leave, not just the legacy we are living with. It allows us to think about what we have learnt from the generation before us, the one before that and ones in our long distant past.

When I drew my own tree of life for the first time, I was able to honour what my mother had taught me – so many things. Despite the many challenges she experienced in her life, she taught me that it didn't have to be that way; that gender, class and geography need not dictate the choices I make. I was also able to make connections with my own beliefs, ideologies, spirituality and even creativity that otherwise (more often than not) might remain hidden. When exploring this with other women, I notice that others have a similar experience, often noticing (as if with new eyes) their own resourcefulness and creativity and reconnecting with

intergenerational stories that may have been lost. Incidentally, it was after telling a story about drawing my tree of life and realising that I was using the same script of 'I am no good at art' to describe (apologise for) my picture, that I decided that I was bored of telling that story and took up art lessons, which I engaged in throughout/ alongside this research. This is one story of difference/ change, resistance; and a story of the reclamation of resourcefulness/creativity.

A place for shame

These are all important stories that reveal themselves through metaphor and through connecting with others; connecting with ancestors and connecting with women in a contemporary sense when done as a group exercise.

In working with women who have been sexually abused, the addition (metaphor) of a 'dung heap' within the picture allows for experiences, stories and people that have been influential in a person's life (such as an abuser) to be in the picture, part of the wider cycle of life but not in, on or connected with the tree. It offers a visual way to 'bin' the abuse, and can speak to distance as well as connection. Language associated with that abuse can also be symbolically binned.

It is a reminder that the legacy of abuse lives on for people a long time after the abuse has ended, but that each person has found their own unique way of 'going' on after the abuse, making choices about how they language that for themselves.

I know this personally from what I experienced in my life which represented a pretty short period of my childhood. It was not sustained or horrific abuse, but it still had an impact. Blame, guilt, anger, shame. Especially shame.

The women I have been speaking with have also talked about shame, about blame, about the lasting legacy of the abuse they experienced but also of living in a society that continues to hide and hush the experiences of women and that continues to perpetuate the myth of equality.

Anne powerfully describes her experience as follows.

“Every time I was raped, everything I felt as a woman disappeared and all I was left with was fear and pain.”

Linda talks about the lasting impact it had, not just on her, but on her relationships and on her children, who also experienced abuse.

“I knew what I was doing but I couldn’t stop it. I wouldn’t let people near me emotionally... As long as I gave men what they wanted obedience – then it was okay. I was just a ‘thing’. I learnt to be passive. It kept me safe.”

When I read about the legacy of abuse in books, journal articles and online, the focus tends to be on the ways that trauma *shows* itself, referred to usually as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or as intrapsychic responses, symptomology (a medically explained impact of trauma). Sometimes, there might be a paragraph on the *impact* on intimate relationships (usually also medically connoted as sexual dysfunction). In non-medical or psychological text there may be reference to the *cost* of the abuse on society, the economy; and occasionally there is reference to justice. Rarely have I read about the impact on the community, the impact on identity (other than if this is medicalised/pathologised), and surprisingly rarely is there reference to the impact on *families*.

Furthermore, the impact of abuse is usually talked about as a response to the (unilateral) *act* of sexual violence, but often when people reflect on their experience what they want to talk about is not the sexual act but the betrayal they experienced. They want to express the confusion they felt that someone they trusted/loved then hurt them/broke their trust, the anguish they experienced at not being believed/not being heard and the rage at not experiencing justice being done. This is the pain they feel as women who have been ignored, forgotten, written out

of history. Anne sums up nicely why interventions that enable voice and speak to social justice are important.

Anne *I feel this kind of outrage when we have to realise that this is not our responsibility. This is someone else's responsibility and we have a right to feel angry and pissed off about what's happened to us, and angry about injustice, and angry about how come stuff HASN'T happened even though we've been telling people.*

A wake-up call

I have previously talked about and written about the legacy of abuse like a 'wake' – the visible tracks left behind by moving aircraft or sea vessels. Perhaps this had more relevance when I was living in an island community where transport by air or sea was the only way to leave the island, to move on. Many women who were part of the island community, just like Linda, talked about a sense of feeling simultaneously trapped and invisible and yet also highly visible. I also felt this when I was on the island and I felt it as a young person trying to get on with my life, having experienced difficult and shaming experiences. It is perhaps less 'island' specific and more related to time and place in a more general sense. In this way, it fits with the research approach that I have used which speaks to both the temporal *and* spatial frame. This has been a key learning point for me, recognising the relevance that space and time had, not just in my inquiry, but for the women involved in it. 'Creating a safe space' was a very clear message that Anne gave me as being the most important aspect of the group. Knowing that we were all part of making that was recognised. I felt privileged hearing Anne (and others) talk about the group in that way.

It reminds me that legacies of abuse are wider than the individual experience of 'post trauma'; they are experienced by whole communities, by the society in which we live. It is not a story of victimhood which enables 'us' to relate to 'other' groups of people who have experienced abuse.

This has also been an important learning point. In the groups I have been part of, we all worked hard to notice and unpack stories that speak to 'othering' and to 'them and us'. This, in itself, was an act of resistance, part of a much wider story, which the next chapter seeks to develop further.

Challenging them and us thinking

Whilst the theme of 'challenging them and us thinking' emerged from the conversations I have had with women who were part of this inquiry, wider issues came to the fore, in the writing.

These included issues of political power, organisational power, shifting personal and professional relationships to power, and also the construction of research as a story of power.

The movement between these important themes is captured by Janey in the excerpt below.

Janey, in our conversations, talked about her shifting identity as a mental health nurse to a group facilitator to academic, and how, as part of that shift in her role she was developing a shift in her thinking. Janey storied it like this... *"for me I've often wondered, especially coming from a nursing background... working with people who are really, really, really unwell and I've often thought that we collectively develop a defence mechanism to help us work in this way where we do regard ourselves as being 'other', 'well', 'competent'; that this kind of thing wouldn't happen to us, that this is the kind of thing that happens to others... this kind of distress ... They happen to 'other' people who are different to us, and that is kind of a way of reducing the sense of threat that you could get from being exposed to such high levels of distress, by thinking, well, that couldn't happen to me ... and for me, it was part of a wider journey of considering myself as part of a human race rather than a 'nurse' ... We could all be distressed, we could all have difficulties at some point, so it required a dismantling of the defence mechanisms that have been put up there for a reason and yet, for me, it felt better. It felt like a better place to be."*

Janey also talked about how this changed her approach within the group that coincided with (or sat within the timeframe of) a greater recognition of service users who participated in health services, the subject of her own research. This showed itself in the group that she facilitated becoming more 'participant' led, which she felt at the time was seen as being quite radical.

"..and so there were some raised eyebrows about that... We started off with the warning voices

in our heads saying things like 'don't forget about boundaries'... and so perhaps when we started we were more mindful of being 'professional' women ... with a different job to do. But as the group went on over the weeks I think there was more of a sense that we were freed up to be ourselves a bit more and to be 'fellow women', and that included 'us', not just 'them'."

This was also the experience for Lucy and I, feeling 'part of' the group and a part of the transformative nature of the group that was developing over time. We would share stories of our own lives, and sit and drink tea with the women who attended, listening but also participating. We were also careful to continuously 'check in' with people. 'How is this meeting going for you this evening?'; 'Are we talking about things you want to talk about?' etc. We would also run past the group any ideas we had for future sessions and ask them how that fitted for them, and how we might all work with it, checking in with process as well as content, and also challenging assumptions, and deconstructing language.

Kris Drumm argues that the ability of groups to 'shatter false dichotomies' is also a core skill of the competent group facilitator who "...*facilitates a process that bursts the bounds of teacher-student, doctor-patient, parent-child power dyads*" (Gitterman, 2003, in Drumm, 2006, p.20).

This fits, I think, with what Judy tells me in our conversation, "...*so you're giving the group back its power, which has taken, so they were powerless when the abuse was going on, so you're... I want to say, turning it on its head, upside down. Inverting the power dynamics.*"

Anna (from the island community group) explained to me how *she* felt that her sense of herself in relation to others shifted through the group. At the beginning, she told me that she was more aware of differences, and felt less comfortable in talking. She described it as "*let's face it, when we started we didn't even like ourselves, so why would we talk it over with yourself?*" This shifted for her over the length of the group. "*I couldn't see where I was but seeing where others were at helped me to see me, because I valued them.*"

Reason and Bradbury promote the role of 'coming together' as a form of action research, highlighting that '*human community involves mutual sensemaking and collective action*'. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). They propose that a '*participatory worldview*' situates human persons and communities as part of their world, generating a story of '*more than human*' (more than a binary) that lives within and between. This participatory perspective invites therapy practices *and* research practices to be both situated *and* reflexive, and to see inquiry as '*a process of coming to know*', which gives rise to the 'reality' being experienced (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). This seems to me to be 'us' rather than 'them' thinking, or what Shotter might call 'witness' rather than 'aboutness' (Shotter, 2006).

Socially informed group work has been storied as getting into 'the muck', or 'the mess' (Schon, 1987) because it "...*embraces the get down and dirty of relating and struggling with problems in meaningful ways*" (Drumm, 2006). It is a story of 'witness', of solidarity.

Janine Roberts (2005) defines the relationship between therapist and client as an intimate one, not a personal relationship per se, but one with 'many personal aspects'. This is my experience in a psychotherapy relationship *and* in therapy groups where many aspects of 'intimacy', 'responsiveness' and 'receptivity' are played out, between all parties.

In a group context, I think this has additional resonance. As a group practitioner, we might expect 'participants' to open up, to respond appropriately with others and to contribute, most likely by drawing on their own experiences, but what do we expect of ourselves, and what do others expect of us?

Kris Drumm (2006) suggests that, "*practitioners are required to be able to be vulnerable and flexible and able to take and give up control in ways that benefit both the group and its individuals.*" (Drumm, 2006, p. 20). This suggests that 'being with' is (in and of itself) potentially transformative, which I fully endorse and ascribe to. It has been an important part of how I

practice in psychotherapy and in group work – *being* with and *doing* ‘withness’.

I was talking with a colleague in Wales recently about the apparent lack of group work programmes (within statutory services, voluntary sector organisations and grass roots organisations locally) that are focused on people coming together as an act of solidarity (withness) as opposed to people coming together to learn ‘psychological skills’, which has become the ‘go-to’ model in health and social care services. In particular, I was attempting to map out available resources (in my new community) for women who have had the experience of sexual abuse or rape. It led us to revisit the rape crisis centre model where my colleague had worked some 30 years previously.

Founded in the 1970s, this movement was an important catalyst of change. It was both an intervention/resource for women in crisis *and* a commentary on the crisis of our *culture*, openly confronting the silence surrounding rape and sexual abuse. This movement was engaged in bringing the private into the public arena and giving voice to the suffering associated with rape. At the time, the movement was considered radical because it perturbed the existing social norms, bringing rights and protection for ‘victims’ far more into the public consciousness. It was significantly associated with the movement towards the non-separation of personal, social and political. It could also be associated with listening to, ‘leaning in’ and learning from direct experience. It was a movement of solidarity, one that is a very different kind of intervention from a psycho-educational skills group, which (I would suggest) is an important distinction when working with people who have experienced oppression. As Imelda McCarthy (2001) suggests, *“the private and the public cannot be separated when one works with the poor; otherwise we are in danger of creating yet another arena for their silencing and further oppression.”* (McCarthy, 2001, pp. 271–272).

When I have worked in some of the most disadvantaged communities in Wales, I have been

troubled by the emphasis on ‘teaching’ people the skills they ‘need’ to parent, to manage stress, to eat more healthily etc., without (as I saw it/ see it) due attention being paid to the relationships that are formed and sustained in contexts that bring people together. This is a risky strategy when working with people who have already experienced acts of oppression and being ‘done to’.

To become anti-oppressive

“Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress.”

(Freire, 1970, p. 178).

This has currency in the UK following the recent investigation into the fire at Grenfell Tower (a social housing tower block) in London that has potentially led to over 80 lives being lost. The number (at the stage of writing) is still in contention. The authorities (police, local council, the housing department) have stated that they feel that this is a realistic number that is not expected to rise. Their ‘research’ into the local population, the residents of the tower and the inquiry following the fire has indicated that there were approximately 350 residents within the tower block. Residents were interviewed arguing that their ‘research’, i.e. their lived experience, their conversations, relationships, information from their lives would indicate that there were more like 500. Which counts as the most accurate? The truth? The real story? Who has the most credibility? The people from the community who have lived experience or the authorities who have access to the resources that can ‘evidence’ something on paper? If some people cannot be found or named from this tragedy (i.e. the research does not find enough evidence that they were there and died) does that mean that they did not exist, live, die, participate in their community? And why is this relevant?

Norman Denzin (2001) calls on us, as researchers, ethnographers and practitioners to “*trouble*

traditional realist notions of truth and verification, asking always, 'who stands to benefit from a particular version of the truth?' ” (Denzin 2001, p. 12). Who, indeed?

This is why I bring this story to the fore. It might not be directly connected to my (retrospective) research, but it is absolutely connected to the purpose of group interventions and narrative inquiry as ways to ‘perturb’, ‘trouble’ and ‘resist’ the systems (and discourses) that oppress.

I was thinking about this in relation to current legislation and the policy drivers that shape our work in health and social care. What would it be like if they asked people who had some *experience* of social inequality what it was like, rather than ask a member of the House of Lords to ‘imagine’ it, I wonder. If they commissioned people with lived experience, what might emerge?

Sir Michael Marmot (2010), a professor at University College London, who advised the coalition government on the link between health and wealth, has warned that research reveals a stark ‘social gradient’ emerging in Britain. He is (I think) talking about the *outcome* of his research, not the *process*. But I think there are parallels. His report suggests that “*the poor not only die on average seven years sooner than the rich, but they can expect to face becoming disabled 17 years earlier*” and “*...if everybody had the same mortality of those with a university education, then [each year] we could prevent 202,000 premature deaths*”.

His being commissioned to undertake the research, tells another story of inequality and reminds me to ask, who has access to the kind of knowledge that constructs knowledge?

I was encouraged that he openly criticised the ‘austerity agenda’ and he warned that a proposed £200m cut to public health budgets at the time was a ‘very bad thing’. He also questioned the government’s plans to raise the pension age past 66 and link it to life expectancy. Rightly (in my view) the report pointed out that average life expectancy figures potentially mask a 16-year gap between those in the best- and worst-off neighbourhoods in our

country. In other words all of these policies, as usual, impact the most *on* the most vulnerable people in society. This is replicated worldwide, at local and global levels. We only have to look at global warming and the impact this has on the most fragile communities as well as the earth itself, which is in itself becoming ever more fragile, and in need of care.

It also made me think about the difference experienced by the women involved in *my* inquiry. I have been concerned with the *felt* difference (between therapist and client/researcher or facilitator and participant), which many of them spoke about, but this report raises difference that might not be felt in an *immediate* sense but is demonstrated by life choices, chances, opportunities and life expectancy. This research suggests that I (as a university educated therapist-researcher) might live longer and expect better health than some of the women I have been in conversation with. This is a sobering/troubling thought, and offers a new dynamic to the 'them and us' debate; it is frankly, shame-inducing and disgusting. It illustrates that there are many differences and similarities visible and invisible embedded in our relationships.

As a woman, I might share *some* experiences of inequality but the *opportunities* we have been afforded may make our life *chances* different, and this is perturbing. I have experienced, in my life, not having money, but I have never experienced the true meaning of living *in* poverty. However, many people in this wealthy country, absolutely do live in poverty. It is obscene. It is destructive and it is life (and earth) threatening. Alongside (and often connected with) environmental change, it adds to the fragility of the earth, of our society, of life itself.

Returning to Wales in 2016, I was reminded of how and why this is significant. In a survey in 2011, it was suggested that one fifth of the Welsh population live in poverty. Those living on the lowest incomes are (once again) the young, the disabled, those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicity, and those living in rented accommodation. However, the single most vulnerable group named was that of lone parents, seen as the most susceptible group, with almost half living in

poverty (*'An anatomy of economic inequality in Wales'*, 2011).

As a woman raised in a one parent household for much of my young life, I have *some* experience of living with the stigma of single parent households. However, because we did not receive benefits, did not live on a council estate and my father had moved out of the family home – meaning that it wasn't simply a case of having 'no father' – it meant that I had a different experience to many who face the full force of public opinion on 'single mothers'. This is another story of 'othering' and demonising a particular group in society, a group that is consistently portrayed as abusing the system despite the statistics that demonstrate that the system is not working for them, or for their children. The abuse, I would suggest, is the other way around. Poverty is unbelievably destructive and shame inducing and is not aided by pointing at the people who experience it as if it is their fault. The parallels with sexual abuse and the relationship with blame (for me) is obvious, but should be made clear. Continuing to blame the people who have experienced abuse is not a useful position. Nothing changes. Individualising that story of blame augments the absurdity. This, I have learnt from *being with* and *talking again* with the women involved in this inquiry; and I have learnt it through practice.

Some of the women (mothers of children with emotional or behavioural difficulties) who continue to attend the wellbeing group for women that I originally facilitated (in a Welsh valleys community) talked of (taught me about) the importance of coming together with other women in a voluntary sector. This setting in their community was one of the few places where they did not feel judged. Despite differences within the group, people felt valued and heard. Many of these women who spoke with me would have experienced multiple markers of poverty, deprivation and oppression. They tell me that *they* learned to value themselves through feeling valued by the facilitators and valuing each other. *I* have learnt that I continue to see the value of group work as contributing to this.

Julia and I have facilitated groups like this for many years, but we have also (in the past) facilitated 'state sanctioned' parenting groups that have a very different feel, and I am reminded of why I stopped working in that way and stopped running groups that are imposed on people.

Leah ...*Such a middle-class idea and ideal, isn't it? ... I always felt that it was very impositional... 'delivering' a parenting class to people, who were so clearly less than privileged...*

Julia *Oh, it was a huge them and us, especially as it was manualised, telling them how to do it, and expecting THEM to change, and if they don't, you consider them RESISTANT.*

I am interested in Julia's insightful use of the word 'resistance' here. In the context of a manualised therapy or groupwork programme, 'being resistant' is seen as a negative quality. In this inquiry, however, 'acts of resistance', 'resistance to oppression; and 'non-violent resistance' have been positioned as a *resource*, a marker of skill, competence and choices about how to 'go on'. It seems to me that the meaning and message embedded in the word 'resistance' varies, depending on the context, and it speaks to power. If you are in a position of power, and in the business of 'doing to' others, then you may view resistance as a negative quality, a deviation from the compliance that is expected. However, if you are positioned in solidarity *with* people then the word becomes a quality that is to be commended. *This* speaks to change.

I have hopefully, in this chapter, been able to illustrate this and illustrate how the conversations I have been involved in have contributed to my reflections on practice, both retrospectively and reflexively. This has been helpful. For me, it is connected with ways of practicing and being that can be encapsulated with Shotter's (2006) invitation to do more 'witness' thinking. This (though theory-based) speaks to (and encourages the development of) socially just *practices* which I consider the groups I have been part of represent. Inevitably, this has taken me into the territory of power and this is built on in the next chapter in even more explicit ways.

Unpacking power

'It was powerful, very powerful.' (Judy)

'Strength in numbers.' (Linda)

'It's been very powerful.' (Anne)

'Going through the group gave me massive strength.' (Laura)

'Ten years ago... and I still remember so well, the people, their stories.' (Janey)

.....

Transforming power relations

The quotes above, the conversations I have had with women, and the themes that emerged from those conversations, *move* me to look more closely at something that calls out to be made visible, when too often it remains hidden; the concept of power. This was foregrounded in many of the conversations with women in this inquiry, in more explicit ways than I might have imagined.

Judy (June 2015) ... *You're giving the group back its power, which was taken, so they were powerless when the abuse was going on so you're... I want to say, turning it on its head, upside down. You bring the realness of yourself to the group and that takes away the power ... there is no power then because you're part of the group...*

Anne (February 2016) ... *The way you worked with us, you kind of gave us our power back... so I don't have to see you as a therapist any more. I see you as someone who has influenced my life in a fantastic way, has opened my eyes to see the good things that can happen to me. Whereas in the past I have seen them as my 'head doctor' (laughs) and when it's just a head doctor the head doctor will always be a parental or a powerful figure.*

Judy *It's like the headmaster of school, isn't it? The power is attached to the names.*

As is evident by the inserted dates, Anne and Judy are not actually in conversation *with* each other, as their conversations (with me) occurred in different time periods and in different locations. However, they *seem* like they are in conversation, as if the dialogue has connected them across the potential divides of time and place. The dialogue seems to suggest a view of power as being held by the facilitators of the group (Lucy, and I) that they were part of (separately). There is also an idea shared that this was somehow then actively 'given over'. I find this interesting and also perturbing. As Clegg (1989) suggests, I am part of a system that "...tends to adhere to dualistic thinking, such as right/wrong, body/mind and ill/well" (Clegg, 1989, p. 7, in Colgrave, 2014).

In the excerpt above, Judy and Anne bring this tendency to dualism into question, noting that (for them) the group helped to break down those dichotomies. They also seem to view the change/transformation as happening *within* the group, not necessarily on a personal level, or held/owned by the individual, or led by the facilitator, but as a collective experience. This may speak to the relationship between solidarity and power. Freire (1970) says that "*solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture*" (Freire, 1970, p. 49). This seems to be in contrast to what Vikki Reynolds (2010, 2014) suggests, which is that direct experience is not necessary as long as one is positioned as an 'imperfect' ally. I experience *this* as powerful, and useful.

The quotes at the beginning of this chapter are all from women who were part of the different groups that feature in this inquiry and they are describing the impact of the group on their lives. This was often referred to as a 'powerful' experience, with some of the women explicitly referring to the group experience as more important than the individual therapy that they had also experienced. I consider that this is (at least in part) because of the purposeful positioning of

the group (and its facilitators) as one of 'solidarity'.

This seems to fit with some of the literature on therapeutic groups, though the availability of relevant research is somewhat limited in relation to the specific context of the groups I have facilitated. These are groups for women who have experienced trauma and abuse and who have come together on a referred basis. The literature that *is* available however seems to focus on the concept that 'coming together' is a key component in a story of transformation (as explored in Act One).

The power of the collective

Coming together in groups is one way to challenge power by finding a collective voice. A short story from practice may help to illustrate this. In a 'storytelling' group I was co-facilitating in January 2018, we all took part in an activity where we shared our 'favourite' word with each other and then developed a story from the words that emerged. These words could be as frivolous, ridiculous or as meaningful as per the choice of the 'sharer'. I was touched to hear one of the women offer her favourite word as 'collaboration'. This, in itself is powerful. It speaks to change, and it is a subtle challenge (resistance) to the status quo.

In a group context, it is always important to pay attention to notions (and the language) of power. As Anne puts it, power might be experienced as being literally 'ripped' from many of the women in a group such as one that is for women who have been sexually abused. For others, they may feel that they have never experienced power or autonomy predating this group experience.

Though varying in age and experience (and though not all of the women were raised in a British community), the women in the island group all spoke about their upbringing/family of origin as being one where they consider that they were raised in a society that still is influenced by the

legacy of patriarchal rule; one that (however subtly) subjugates women and silences their experience and *disempowers* them.

A gendered view of power

Joanna Russ proposes that patriarchy is so deep rooted in our society that other stories get 'drowned out' by the dominance of the ongoing notion that "*our culture is male, our literary myths are for heroes, not heroines*" (Joanna Russ, 1995, p.183). Selener (1997) takes this further by suggesting that "*one of the greatest obstacles to creating a more just world is the power of the dominant hegemony, the ideological oppression which shapes the way people think*" (Selener, 1997, in Reason and Bradbury, 2001 p. 26).

It has been argued by many feminist scholars that stories of womanhood are often, not only *othered*, but rendered *invisible* and may not readily be associated with stories of power. Meenal Shrivastava (2016) has written about this invisibility for women in Indian history, particularly in relation to social action movements, but also notes that whilst this is culturally sensitive it is not culturally exclusive. She suggests that the marginalisation of women through history is a 'global' phenomena.

Joan Sangster (1994) also, for example, highlights that the lack of emphasis on the *oral* tradition of storytelling (where many women's stories reside) means that women's stories are often not *heard*. She argues that these oral stories could be incorporated into literary stories, if the motivation were there to do so. She also notes, however, the important ethical dilemmas for the storyteller or researcher in *telling* (or writing) 'other' women's stories. Of course, this is something that resonates for me, as a researcher but also as a therapist (interested in storytelling) and as a woman who has her own stories to tell. Bringing women's stories to the forefront can absolutely be seen as an act of resistance, but it could also (potentially) be felt as oppressive if that is experienced as someone else taking/writing your story and losing your

voice in the process.

I recall a story from my own life that speaks to this in some ways. In my family therapy training at The Family Institute in Wales we had been invited to contribute to a personal development group, using the theme of power and powerlessness. I had prepared for this session by thinking about times in my life when I had felt both experiences. I recall that there were many experiences that came to mind but I do not recall, at the time, thinking about this at, what could be called, a political or cultural level. I was accessing *personal* stories. The story I chose to tell was related to my personal experience of womanhood and motherhood.

Another woman in the group told a story of feeling powerful when she gave birth to her children. I followed this by telling a story about being told that I had a condition that could affect my ability to have children. I was in my early twenties and I felt, at the time, that choice was being taken away from me. The doctor had suggested that if I wanted a family, then I should make that decision sooner rather than later, as the chance would lessen with age. I remember at that time, resenting what I thought of as being dictated to. I did not feel ready to have a family, and so carried on my life as normal. As it turns out I never did reach a stage when I felt 'ready' to have a family, and so never tried to. I relayed this as a story of powerlessness *and* of power, feeling that I had taken the power of choice back. Interestingly though, when people talked with me about this afterwards, the comments centred on sympathy for my 'child-free status' and the questions that arose focused on whether I might still try to have children. It seemed as if this was the only message to be taken from the discussion, and yet that had not been what I intended in the telling. I *felt* my story becoming invisible. I imagine many women have different and similar 'powerful' stories to tell.

Feminism and power

Sanna Colgrave (2014) suggests that feminist theories of power were initially *structural* theories;

in that power was seen as '*unitary and unidirectional*'. In other words, power was viewed as being held *by* men and exerted *over* women. The feminist perspective questioned the more obvious institutional power exerted over women and the more invisible power differences in everyday life, in home and work life and in interpersonal relationships.

Judith Butler (1990) and Mary Joe Frug (1992), amongst others, have constructed postmodern feminist theories of power. They argue, amongst other things, that sex and gender are separate concepts, not natural or determined, but constructed through language and society. In being constructed through language, the constructs are therefore open to challenge, resistance and political movement. Social constructionist theorists have, of course, further developed this argument.

Nicola Gavey (1989) states that feminist post structuralism is 'underpinned' by the notion that language constitutes subjectivity. Meaning, she suggests, is therefore 'neither fixed, nor essential' but constructed through language.

Mary Gergen (2001) suggests that the postmodern feminist approach is to question but not necessarily to deny all linguistic categories, including the category of gender. She suggests that there may be a divergence in feminist psychology on the level of purpose. She says that "*...for some feminists, the goal of the movement is the resolution of gender differences. Thus, if women and men are truly equal, and if fairness prevails in all things, then differences become unimportant. For other feminists, the goal of the movement is to focus on the special qualities of women and to promote a culture in which feminist values prevail.*" (Gergen, M., 2001, p. 10).

For me, personally, there is less separation between these two ideas than is perhaps suggested (or at least in how I make sense of it). If feminism (which it does for me) adopts fairness at the level of approach then qualities that might be ascribed the construct of 'female' qualities such as non-violence, nurturing life (all life) on earth, then aiming for equality *and* celebrating feminist

values can coalesce. In this way, it could be argued that creating space for women's stories to be heard and validated is an important contribution to feminism. We *need* to highlight stories of resistance, stories of achievement and 'special qualities' so that they can be heard alongside the stories that might otherwise dominate and maintain social inequality.

Tackling inequality

Harper (2016) tells us that there is now substantial evidence that social inequality has a '*powerful effect on mental and physical health*'. Many theorists, psychologists and psychotherapists have written about this in recent years (see Cromby et al., 2013; Read and Sanders, 2010; Friedli, 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009 etc.) and this is no surprise for those of us working in communities that seem 'saturated' in social inequality. There have been a number of 'networks' that have developed in recent years that reflect an understanding of the issues and a collective desire to 'do something' in the face of it. *Psychologists against Austerity* (2015) and *Psychologists for Social Change* are just two that I am familiar with. On a personal level, I have recently begun working with the Wales Refugee Council as a way to practice 'justly' and I am building connections with other organisations that do the same.

Harper (2016) highlights some of the key findings that have influenced this 'wave' and foregrounds the need to challenge injustice and inequality. He says that a recent survey suggests that men and women living in lower-income households are significantly more likely to receive a psychiatric diagnosis than those living in higher-income households. He also suggests that lower-income households are significantly more likely to be medicated as opposed to other forms of treatment; 31 per cent, compared to 17 per cent in higher-income households (Anderson et al., 2009). Tarrier summarises why it is important that we remind ourselves of this in a clinical/health context.

"Much of mental distress no doubt has its roots in, or is at least exacerbated by, social

deprivation and inequality and their psychological consequences. A good dose of social justice and redistribution of wealth would do the world's health a lot of good. In the meantime, any psychological treatment can only be a sticking plaster over the wound of such inequality..."

(Tarrier, 2002, p. 292 in Harper, 2006).

In addition, Greene, Lee and Hoffpuir (2005) suggest that, given that we (in health and social care) are '*... in the business of client change and empowerment*', we should be paying due attention to the language we use to "*...carefully engage in dialogical interactions and conversations that will facilitate the social construction of clients' sense of self as competent and resourceful...*" (Greene, Lee and Hoffpuir, 2005, p. 267). I find I could not agree more. I would also add, however, that we have the potential (and systemic practitioners are well placed to do this) to not only be careful in *our* use of language, but also deconstruct and challenge the language that dominates our work cultures and the power structures this language maintains.

Deconstructing power structures

Foucault's (1980, 1991) position on power as 'meta', omnipresent and pervasive is a persuasive one, and provides context to how power is 'viewed'. From this perspective, power is not 'natural', but constructed and maintained from within. In the context of change or transformation, patriarchy may be one such discourse which many (see bell hooks, in Buchwald, 2005, as an example) would argue maintains a 'rape culture' that continues to subjugate and objectify women; and one that (in the development of the group work that I have been discussing) we were collectively aware of and part of deconstructing and transforming (at least at a local level).

Colgrave (2014) says that Hobbes' (1839) concept of power formed the foundation of '*how power is usually defined, and continues to be defined*'. In this definition, power is conceptualised as a tangible thing that can be possessed/owned and used and establishes the expression of power as 'power over'. French and Raven (1959) argue that there are five types of power:

referent power; expert power; reward; coercive; and legitimate power. In terms of paying attention to power in both therapeutic and in research relationships, these differing concepts of power on a personal and interpersonal level are worthy of regard. This perhaps offers a conceptual backdrop to how power is made sense of in practice.

As a woman working in hierarchical institutions such as the health service and academia, it seems to me that I am continuously moving within and between what could be described as domains of power. This was something that my co-facilitators and I discussed on an ongoing basis throughout the group. We were careful, for example, about where we sat, what we wore, how we met with the group, what we said, how the room was set up, what building we used (and what that might represent to people), and how we worked together. I recall Lucy and I ensuring that we take it in turns to make the teas and coffees to ensure that we did not fall into the trap of representing ourselves in a hierarchical way, with the 'nurse-practitioner' making the coffee (taking care of the group) whilst the 'specialist psychotherapist' manages the paperwork or the exercises we took part in (the content). This was commented on by Anne (in our conversation for this inquiry) where she noted that it was a really important ritual that Lucy and I made the tea, as it made them feel welcomed and cared for, rather than being the ones who care for others. She also noted that she felt that Lucy and I worked well together and her experience was that we liked and respected each other. This may seem a peripheral issue, but I think this also speaks to a deliberate attention that we paid to notions of power and hierarchy in a health service that is so dominated by pay scales, grades and positions within the organisation.

A discourse of power

Ball (1990) highlights Foucault's concept of 'dividing practices' as central to power relations in education. The practice of grading, grouping and streaming children into classes is based on

perceived ability which serves to divide and 'other'.

"Every educational system is a political means of maintaining, or modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and power they bring with them." (Foucault, 1971, p. 46).

From my perspective, because I have worked in mental health services, I feel the same can be seen in diagnostic criteria. The emphasis on the classifications found in the DSMV in the UK serve to emphasise that divisive practice. Colgrave (2014) suggests that Foucault was instrumental in developing a new discourse, one that questions institutional power and such divisive practices, categorically connecting the concept of power to the medical model and indeed to therapeutic practices in his book, 'Madness and civilization'. In this important book, Foucault argued that people with what might be now named as psychological or psychiatric problems (or what previously might have been labelled as 'madness') questioned the illusion of 'reason' for the first time during the Enlightenment period, which was unsettling for the 'status quo'.

The suggestion is that this fear of madness has persisted into our contemporary 'pseudo-medical perspectives', which (Colgrave argues) serves to externalise the feared parts of ourselves into others. This construction of madness, she suggests, is perpetuated by what Foucault conceptualised as *'a web of social practices in both institutions and everyday interactions'*, that focus on illness and cure (Foucault, in Colgrave, 2014). Taking this further, Norman Denzin invites suspiciousness of *"...power dynamics that turn sections of the public into victims, instead of privileging the 'client-public' relationships' as a 'moral advocate for the public'"* (Denzin, 2001, p.118). I consider this to be highly relevant in contemporary practices in mental health services, and need not (should not) be seen as historical issues. Foucault raises many important theoretical points, but/and it is how this influences *current* practice that interests me, in order to provoke change.

Disrupting power

Nancy Hartsock (1989) suggests that in order to *make* change, this requires a deeper understanding of power and power relations, to have a theory that works, in practice. She argues that traditional theories of power are insufficient and that there needs to be a theory that is specific to the context of gender. She asserts that Foucault's power theories do not fit the bill.

Hartsock's main argument appears to rest on the premise that Foucault, whilst positioning himself as resisting the dominant discourse of patriarchal, colonial power is still, in essence, *representing* the 'coloniser'. Whilst offering a challenge to modernity, Hartsock argues that he does not offer clear reasons for resistance. I think that this is also what Linda Tuhawai Smith (1999) warns against in naming the risks of affiliating with the notion of a post-colonial paradigm when the hierarchies of power associated with colonialism are still active.

I do not disagree with these critiques; however, I also feel that Foucault's concept of 'biopower', which still acts as a contemporary experience of power in 'western' society, is still highly relevant. The premise being that the institutions that hold power *now* retain power by promoting the idea that they 'protect life' and protect against our 'feared parts' (Foucault, 1974) rather than historic notions of power associated with the threat of death. In other words, mental health services (as one of many institutions that maintain people in a position of other) help the dominant groups in society feel 'safe'. The suggestion is that this seemingly more benign method to maintain power is no less power-*ful*. As Combs and Freedman (2012) suggest, 'modern power' enlists the public to 'police' themselves, through powerful discourses that ensure that the more 'privileged' in society have the most 'influence' on those discourses. Interventions and research that promote social justice play their part in resisting and potentially disrupting that power.

Power and Narrative

Combes and Freedman (2012) declare that '*all narrative work is social justice work*' in that it is always in the business of noticing *and* challenging the marginalisation processes associated with mental health systems that pathologise and subjugate the people that get assigned to 'patienthood', in what Foucault would name as 'dividing practices'. The Foucauldian concept of power, in this context, does not just question the notion of 'madness' (in a historical sense) but in terms of modern 'bio' power, in the subtle ways in which 'working' class communities are labelled as deviant or 'subnormal'. I think it is vital to pay attention to this as it still feels highly relevant.

I have (sadly) many times seen practices within mental health services (individual and institutional practices) that continue to perpetuate the discourse of victimhood and patienthood, especially when associated with people who have less access to financial resources that might increase access to other forms of 'power'.

Colgrave (2014) suggests that there has been an increase in publications (in the family therapy and narrative field) that speaks to greater transparency. She also highlights, however, that despite many authors arguing the position, that there is a need for further research that pays attention to power in the therapeutic relationship. This is supported by Goldberg (2001) who also argues that power is still the most neglected aspect of a therapist's training, which he suggests is caused by a reluctance of the psychotherapy profession to see power dynamics as a '*crucial concern for therapy*' (Goldberg, 2001, in Colgrave, 2014).

This argument takes me back to the original quotes from the women who attended the groups that I was part of; that their experience of being part of a group such as the one they attended was a 'powerful' one. I wonder if they would have used the same words to describe their experience of assessment or indeed therapy (in an institutional context)? Or whether they might

have commented more (as Anne did) on the (uni-directional) power they experience *from* the person they have been ‘sent’ to see. Again, I would suggest that collaborative groups that promote solidarity and social justice can offer a disruption to this.

In summary, I think it is fair to say that the theme of power is a complex one, one that invites multiple definitions and explorations. It includes considering *constructed* groups as a powerful medium through which change (through solidarity) can be witnessed and experienced, if managed with care. In addition, groups such as these which foreground solidarity, can also be part of a story of *deconstructing* and challenging power that speaks to hierarchy and oppression; this is what the women in this inquiry have taught me.

Deconstructing the *language* of power in this chapter has also been complex. I am left with a similar feeling to the one that I experience post-therapy session when considering what was talked about, why and how. I am noticing (as I do in those situations) that there were many potential directions I could have chosen to travel to and from; and to a large extent I ‘followed my nose’, meandering through transcripts, personal notes and extensive literature that is also illustrative of the vastness of the theme. This is also part of the learning experience; learning to trust my own judgment, backed up by the women I have been in conversation with, and backed up by my training and experience. I might not have done *full* justice to the subject, contained within a single chapter, but it is likely that the themes that have emerged through this chapter will show themselves in other chapters, in other writing and in my ongoing practices. This is part of the legacy of an inquiry such as this; and (to me) continues to speak to (and within) the frame of social justice. This is where we are heading next, to pay more attention to this important theme and its relationship to practice *and* research.

Doing social justice

In this chapter, I am moving from the pivotal theme of *unpacking* power towards thinking about how, as a practitioner-researcher, I might deconstruct, question and *challenge* abuse of power within a frame of social justice. I recall in conversations with colleagues through the course of my doctoral learning that I was initially reluctant to use the language of ‘social justice’. My reason for this was that it just felt too ‘big’, or maybe too ‘grand’ a claim. I could not believe (at that stage) that I would be able to contribute *anything* grand enough to warrant using the language. ‘How do you *do* social justice?’ was the question I was asking myself. ‘Do you need to be on the front line with banner in one hand and doctoral certificate in the other, simultaneously demonstrating academic rigour with activist credentials?’ I was unsure if I could (maybe certain I could not) live up to this. It was Vikki Reynold’s work that won me over. When I started thinking about ‘doing justice’ in terms of *doing justice with* the women I was in conversation with and other women and the stories I hear, this seemed more in reach *and* more important.

Nancy Fraser (1998) suggests that claims for social justice are divided into two types. One, she says, calls for the redistribution of resources, and the other calls for the recognition of cultural difference. She argues that whilst they are often polarised and those responding to the call are seemingly asked to ‘*choose between class politics and identity politics*’, she suggests that there is a false dichotomy and that a contemporary social justice agenda requires ‘*both redistribution and recognition. Neither alone is sufficient.*’ (Fraser, 1998, p. 1).

Fraser suggests that one, wider conceptual framework is required to take the agenda forward. She suggests that “*the task is to understand the complex relations between class and status, economy and culture, in social contexts that are increasingly postindustrial, transnational, and multicultural*” (Fraser, 1998, p. 1).

She also asks the question that I have often pondered, in order to address injustice: do we need to name difference or work within a frame of commonality? Nancy Fraser suggests that this cannot be answered. I tend to agree. This has the danger of being another unnecessary dichotomy.

As previously noted, when working with women who have experienced abuse, gender has often felt critical to name, but my colleagues and I have also been challenged in this regard. This is perhaps also a challenge we need to *keep* being challenged by, rather than attempting to come to a definitive answer. This has moved me (in a past and current tense; and on an emotional and doing level) to think about my own experiences of injustice, keeping curious and engaged in the recursive process.

This stance of curiosity and reflexivity moved me to have a conversation (in written form) with my mother, and then to include aspects of that in this inquiry; neither of which I planned for or would have anticipated, but it felt important. It felt as if my story and voice did not make sense without my mother's story and voice; and I think this added to the richness and complexity of the inquiry. I notice many connections between what I have shared and what she has shared with me; as well as many connections with what other women have spoken about.

My mother tells a story of how she was given legal advice to stay in an abusive relationship because otherwise she would risk losing her home and her children, and could risk her story being made public. *'You don't want to be in 'News of the World'* was what she was advised by a legal representative.

"... and so I went on. I didn't give in; and was told to grin and bear it... but it got worse until it was affecting the children... so I can see and understand how women stay in these situations. It's not an equal society – not socially, workplace, moneywise... I know the feeling of 'it's all too much' and of 'why am I here?' "

This story is almost exactly the same as the one experienced by Laura; almost forty years later. Laura left an abusive relationship but was advised that her ex-partner would not be prosecuted because her story might not be believed. 'It's not an equal society' continues to have resonance; and was highly visible in the group that I was a part of. Though I did not share my mother's story – or mine – with Laura, or with the group, I consider that we *were* connected in solidarity; not based on what we knew about each other in terms of specific stories, but what we 'knew' about what it means to live within a culture of inequality. This then is not a form of direct self-disclosure, but a form of 'doing solidarity' (Reynolds, 2014) or what Macbeth (2001) terms as 'positional validity', a form of self-reflexivity that speaks to a willingness to be exposed, without necessitating *direct* exposure on the part of the practitioner. I explore this aspect of solidarity through transparency later as it is an interesting theme, which also speaks to social inequality.

As a young woman raised in a working-class community, and an adult working in areas of deprivation, I have seen the impact of inequality, poverty and oppression first hand. As a young woman, I also had family members who frequently shared their views of the world based on white, male and *privileged* positions, views that disqualified me as a woman and disqualified my views as a woman concerned with justice.

These are the stories that shape me and why I 'know' that the personal is always connected with the political. This is why I have been influenced so much by narrative practices; because it fits with what I know at a non-theoretical level.

Gail Simon has written about narrative inquiry and narrative therapy as offering the potential for social change. She says, "*narrative therapy invites therapists and community workers to allow themselves to be moved to action by the stories they hear...*" (Simon 2014, p. 10). Kahn and Monk (2017) have highlighted the relevance of the combination of '*narrative theory with the analysis of modern power*' in systemic practices which they suggest has "...*created a unique*

approach to therapy that provide tools to challenge oppressive influences that negatively affect clients' lives" (Kahn and Monk, 2017, p 7).

When I reflect on *my* practices, I believe that this willingness to challenge oppression is something that has followed me in my differing roles from youth worker to project worker in a family centre, through to being a family therapist in a health service. It probably became more noticeable as I witnessed and learnt about the impact of social inequality on Welsh families living in mining communities, working in the communities where they lived. Studying systemic psychotherapy initially felt like a departure for me, a move from community work into a clinical context, and initially came with reticence. I was worried about becoming part of a potentially isolated context, part of the dominant discourse, and away from the context of people's lives. Yet (over time) I feel I have been able to develop practices which encompass a socially just repertoire within and outside of the 'clinic'.

A colleague said to me recently, something along the lines of *'I have noticed that social inequality is a major theme for you'*. I was struck by this comment, which was said in passing by a colleague I respect and work closely with. I was struck with it for multi-layered reasons. My initial thought was *'yes, of course, this would be obvious to anyone who knows me personally or professionally'*, and then I thought *'but this should not be unique to me; we should all be concerned with this'*. Then, I thought for my colleague to comment on this now as if she was just realising it that perhaps it has *not* been obvious enough, maybe I temper it, maybe I need to be more blatant. What does it mean, in this time and place, to be politically active? There are so many ways beyond being an elected representative. Of course, I am political, and of course I consider myself to be socially active, but perhaps this shows itself in more subtle ways. Perhaps this is the case for many.

In an age of online campaigns and with social media closely associated with social action,

marching in the streets and wearing the colours of party politics is perhaps an old-fashioned idea. Practicing and living in ethically informed, socially just ways is perhaps more attuned with ideas of mass movement, such as the rape crisis movement. In this context, the word movement is pivotal. A socially just and informed way of being is not a static position that can easily be named, fixed or measured. bell hooks (2000) says that '*sisterhood is (still) powerful*', and I agree that this is still moving, developing, still valid, even if I have been challenged to reconsider my gendered use of language.

The notion of solidarity (which is perhaps embedded in the language of sisterhood) is one that I have written about previously (Salter, 2015, 2017a) and for me, this is not just about my experience of being with other women in a group context. I feel that the inquiry *itself* has acted as a second layer of solidarity, an understanding that storytelling that supports transformation and connects the group in a way that moves us to social action is (in itself) a troubling of systemic power imbalances that maintain silence and the status quo.

Norman Denzin highlights the role of the ethnographer to be 'suspicious' of power relations and narratives that turn or hold certain sections of the public into 'victims', and instead advocates for privileging the 'client-public' relationship as a 'moral advocate for the public' (Denzin, 2003).

I consider that this inquiry has contributed to this movement and, in turn, my practice has become associated with social justice in a more visible way, in ways that my colleagues notice and name. This has, no doubt, had a direct impact on the way that I live and practice ethically, continuing to make visible what might otherwise be hidden. This has been a welcomed outcome of the inquiry and my commitment to reflect on practices I am engaged in. Whether I now see myself as a social activist or frame what I do as practices that *speak* to social justice, perhaps remains open for others to judge. I rarely go for grand gestures associated with social activism, but my everyday practices as a therapist and researcher, are becoming more and more

connected with (everyday) acts of resistance. This is where I am heading in my practice and where I am taking us in the final chapter to this act, before moving towards the epilogue which takes this further as a story of 'becoming a researcher'.

Doing research as (an act of) resistance

As something that emerged from the five-step inquiry, this theme featured most heavily in conversation with my supervisor, a conversation which was transcribed and became part of the inquiry, *after* the conversations with women had taken place. As such, the theme of *research as resistance* does not feature so much in conversations with Anne, Anna, Judy, Julia, Linda, Lucy, Laura and Janey, so their voices may be less present in this chapter. However, it was not altogether absent and was very much in my thinking even if it did not feature in conversation

An excerpt from my notes following the conversation with my supervisor may illustrate this.

“This story (this transcribed conversation) provides the framework from which the other stories can be told. This is my story, a story of transformation in practice. It is a story of sense-making, a female practitioner looking back on where she has come from, reflecting on her past and current practices and thinking about how they are developing further. It is a story that speaks to multiple roles and identities for all people in these conversations.

I notice that when I talk of being heard (in this conversation with Billy) that I am not just talking about women I work with (not being heard) but I am pointing to a parallel process of not always feeling heard myself. Perhaps it is possible that my research can give me a voice, as well as those I am speaking with...”

This, in itself, I think speaks to resistance and to the connection between all the stories included in this inquiry. The notion of ‘resistance’ was very present both within the group and in ‘talking again’ for the inquiry. Janey’s act of whistleblowing can very much be seen as an act of resistance, and Lucy and I setting up the group in a community that denied it had an issue with sexual abuse was an act of resistance. The women coming together and refusing to be silent was a clear, collective act of resistance. There are also many more (less grand but no less

powerful) narratives of resistance within those wider stories.

An example can be seen in my conversation with Anne, who speaks to a collective act of resistance that we were both part of, resisting the pressure to stay within the confined (and confining) language of 'therapist' and 'client' whilst still working within the ethical framework of the profession.

Anne *Yeah, because you both have stepped out. You know you're still therapists but you've stepped OUT and you've become MORE. Cos you don't just see us as patients; you see us as people...*

Anne also speaks to her own story of resistance by talking about decisions she has made to resist the pressure of silence.

Anne *And that's why I don't feel like I need to hide my name or who I am... cos I think more people who can achieve this (sense of safety) need to speak out to say you can achieve this otherwise how are people going to know... everybody hides behind closed doors because you're embarrassed and you don't want to know; and I understand that different people feel differently but I think I'm at that point where I feel very, very strongly that life can change and it WILL change... and going through the group helped me realise that.*

Of course, this is a massive step that Anne has taken, to speak out against injustice and to speak out about her own experiences; a decision that not all women will (or should) make. It needs to be taken with care and thought for physical and psychological safety. For Anne, this was her way to 'go on', in a way that best fitted her own sense of integrity and justice. It is a story *within* a story that could easily be overlooked or forgotten amongst 'grander' narratives.

As previously mentioned, in terms of practice, the work of Allan Wade provided a lens for me to reflect on the ways that people go on after abuse and violence as '*small acts of living*' or

'everyday' acts of resistance. It also reminds me how these stories are under-privileged (Wade, 1997).

Families and communities (and indeed societies) are *full* of stories of 'survival' and 'resistance', ways that people collectively 'go on' following devastating acts of violence and abuse, and yet (often) they are also undiscovered or unheard. This way of storying the everyday resourcefulness of people encourages me as a psychotherapist to work harder to uncover these acts of resistance in the unfolding of moment-to-moment stories of people's lives in therapeutic conversations and in community interventions. In doing so, this can bring to the surface previously invisible stories of resistance and resourcefulness, such as the ones that are shared in this writing. Stories from women like my mother, like Judy, Anne, Janey, Anna, Laura and Linda, who have chosen to share their stories of everyday resistance. This does not come without risk though, for anyone, as Janey's story perhaps most clearly demonstrates. For many of us, however, the risk felt necessary, in order to resist the silence that surrounds abuse, oppression and injustice.

Whilst in the process of the conversational inquiry, I was invited to submit a paper for a special edition of '*The Journal of Family Therapy*' (Salter, 2017b). I took the risk in sharing some of my personal stories in this journal that is read by so many of my colleagues and peers. I did so with thought, but also with trepidation.

The edition was dedicated to systemic research and as well as considering how much to share (or not) of my personal experiences, I also started to think about what this meant – to be engaged in research that is defined as 'systemic' and to be on a professional doctorate as a 'researcher'. What did research mean to *me*?

I became more attuned (through this) to threads that have connected my practice to/with my personal stories and connected my practice to this emerging definition of self as researcher. I

recognised through this that practicing within small communities is a thread that has been there throughout my career and one that I want to maintain, nurture and develop. I also recognised that talking with people in groups and communities is not something that I want to let go of. I noticed then that I have already begun to actively seek more opportunities to do community work, training (in groups), group work with women, and more opportunities to further inquire into what it is I think I do, in these varying contexts.

As I did so, I noticed that my sensitivity towards community issues and social justice was entering more obviously into the (potentially more enclosed) family therapy space with me. It was finding its way into the conversations I was having with families in what otherwise might be seen as a clinical setting.

These are some of the outcomes of my inquiry and how my practice as a researcher has directly influenced my practice as a therapist. An example from current practice, I think, serves to illustrate this sense of movement.

In a recent conversation with a family living in one of the small communities I practice within, we were talking about notions of freedom and space and dreams of 'broadening horizons' in a metaphorical way. The young man in the family, who had been considering whether he felt ready to leave home, noticed that when he travels outside of his community he has fewer experiences that have been defined (by some) as paranoia, feeling persecuted, pursued, and hearing voices, something they had all been trying to make sense of in their own ways. This led us to talk about the geography of this community. I remembered visiting there recently and being aware of the low mist and the high mountains around the community, which literally created a small horizon, and a feeling of being hemmed in. He then began to talk about what it was like to live in a small community where everybody knows your business, and how he has struggled with that throughout his adult life, but not been able to name it or have that idea

validated, as his family had more positive experiences of small community living. I noticed as he engaged in this kind of talk that he leaned forward in his chair, and there was an energy to how he engaged with me, there was more eye contact and more 'spark'.

This was an interesting conversation and one that I consider is connected to the reflexivity involved in an inquiry such as this; a movement between past practices that I am reflecting *on*, current practices that I am engaged *in* and how these noticings *shape* new possibilities for going on. I also noticed that I began to think about this, not in isolation, but in relation to other families I talk with; wondering if this frame would be helpful for them; wondering what patterns were emerging; wondering how it might help to capture such patterns. I noticed that I was thinking like a practice-based researcher and thinking about my everyday practices as research.

Earlier that year (April 2017), I had attended a workshop with Rolph Sundret and Ottar Ness (from Norway) which was entitled 'research in and as everyday practice'. There had been lots of debate about what this entailed and I had been challenged in this workshop in thinking about what permissions may be available to *really* see daily practice as research when working in a context (health service) that sees the two as separate entities. One requires clinical accountability backed up by professional registration and the other requires a paperwork trail that could wipe out an entire rainforest. I have begun to think about how practice can speak to creativity and how creativity can speak to research as an everyday art of what I do *in* practice, despite the potential barriers to seeing practice as research and research as practice. Since then, I have built up a relationship to the research and development group in my current work context and am constantly thinking about how research and practice can helpfully interact, in new and creative ways.

Taiwo Afuape (2011) talks about the value of creativity *and* resistance in working with refugees and asylum seekers, those who have survived (are surviving) trauma and oppression on a

global scale. She writes and speaks about 'liberation practices' and I have heard her do so with a quiet and subtle strength that (I imagine) might stem both from her own experiences and those of people she meets and talks with. In a recent book (2016) she discusses group work she has undertaken with young people that has some resonance with a project I have recently developed. Here, the aim is threefold: to *hear* people's stories; for people's stories to *be* heard; and for this to feed into mechanisms for things to *be* different and to evoke change.

The project I developed was a digital storytelling group with women involved in secondary care mental health services with the aim to support women to explore more interesting and rich stories of resistance, resilience and resourcefulness – beyond a single definition of deficit offered by a diagnosis – within the system I find myself in. The first six weeks of this project offered space for personal stories to be generated, constructed and crafted; and resulted in individual narratives being captured in the form of short digital stories. The women in this group then had the choice to keep these for themselves, share them with practitioners they felt would learn from their story, or potentially take them to a wider audience via social media or another medium, so that more people could bear witness to their story; and where their story may bring about change. Authorship, directorial and editing rights remained with the person who shared their story; but if they *chose* to share their story (in a wider sense), this could provide 'evidence' for how a group such as this, a coming together of women in solidarity with one another, can support personal and collective transformation. The evidence is both their story, *and* their exercised right to share or not. In other words, the research element is built in.

We brought this group to a conclusion by creating additional weeks for community stories of resilience to be shared with each other, using the skills and creativity that they brought to the group (some were poets, some lyricists, some visual artists). The aim was to give space for collective transformation but also for making sense of personal stories and connections forged

within the group, a second opportunity for reflection, a 'talking again' with women, not just about their personal experiences but how they were able to connect and be in a group such as this. I do not think that I would have designed the group in the same way or with the same focus if I had not engaged in the research represented in this thesis. *Being* in this inquiry has taught me that 'talking again' with people in a 'during *and* after the event' way offers new possibilities for transformation at a local (practice) level.

Making more global connections

Recently, I was watching a television programme on the River Ganges in India, which was presented by Sue Perkins. This was during the editing processes of this thesis and I was moved by what seemed like a peripheral story within the documentary about local university students who were working on a voluntary basis with women in a rural village near the centre of Varanasi. Their interest was in helping them to keep themselves safe in an area that was experiencing high incidents of sexual assault against women. The women were taught self-defence skills, but more important (it seemed, from what *they* were saying) was the sense of *solidarity* that their coming together developed, which gave them a 'collective voice' to challenge local representatives about the safety aspect of having no toilet facilities in the village. This lack of basic facilities was not just degrading but meant that they were travelling significant distance alone at night to find a quiet place where they could discretely 'go', which added significantly to the risks they faced on a daily basis. Their sense of *collective identity* (visually marked by their green sarees) seemed key in them being able to name their needs and put those needs onto a political agenda. As I was watching this, I felt connected to their story, though my life is very different in an everyday sense, and my cultural heritage is also very different. I saw from a new angle the contribution that a local ('culturally situated') intervention can have, not just on the community within which it is in an intimate relationship with, but in the context of being part of

making 'better social worlds'. I also notice (in a present tense awareness) that I am thinking like a researcher. As soon as the programme was over I was on the internet looking into this intervention in India and found that there is a wider movement of *pink* saree wearing 'Gulabi gang' women who are finding solidarity through a collective identity and who are part of a process of change in India, similar to the green saree wearing women in this local example.

This process of discovery comes from a position of 'curiosity' (Cecchin, 1987) which is no different to what I 'tune into' and 'dial up' when I am having conversations with families in a therapy room. And then I notice that I am 'tuning into' seeing systemic practice as inquiry. Gail Simon (2014) reminds us that the early Milan school of systemic psychotherapy was concerned with just this. The questions they were asking were part of an ethos of curiosity and a way of inviting a reflexivity that might influence second order change, a change within the *system*, not just in the individual. In her own doctoral thesis, Gail Simon (2011) suggests that systemic therapists, as they are in the process of *becoming* researchers through doctoral research, often feel that they have to learn *new* skills, and often underestimate or under-*privilege* the skills they bring from therapy practice. She argues that these are not necessarily different skills, and that the two types of systemic practice are strongly in *relationship* with one another.

I find that I am connecting with this the more I am immersed in research and notice that research is feeling more *like* practice. This also connects with the distinction between local and global reflexivity (Gail Simon, 2011). This has been an interesting part of the inquiry, moving between the local context of my everyday practices and wider markers of social change and social action. This *spatial* frame has been helpful, but I have noticed also the movement between *temporal* frames, which should be evident through the different stages of inquiry.

Timely local and global practices

Here is a further example for how these local/global and temporal frames have coalesced, not only in my research practices but in my practices as a psychotherapist/supervisor and trainer. Currently, I am engaged with The Refugee Council in Wales working with them to develop reflective practices, supervision and support for staff working with people who have experienced significant trauma and abuse; helping them to live in safety and navigate the systems they *need* to navigate in order to stay living safely in Wales. The Welsh Government aims to be the world's first country of sanctuary; in fact, all major Welsh cities have already reached this status, which is, of course, encouraging. Within this context, I have been talking with staff about how it may be possible to facilitate helpful therapeutic conversations through their work; when refugees and asylum seekers might not have access to traditional psychotherapy. Engaging with the case workers from this organisation and developing an understanding of the challenges they face personally and professionally has helped me to feel useful to them; and I feel that I am contributing to the co-construction of better social worlds.

All the women I spoke with in *this* inquiry also related to this notion of creating 'better social worlds' and being part of a story of resistance. When I asked the fourth question in my series of four questions, 'how were we making better social worlds?' not one person said 'what do you mean by that?' There was (what seemed to be) instant connection.

What I had to do with that was to take it further to think about how I want to be part of making a 'better social world' or (in other words) how to use my research as an 'act of resistance', taking it into the public domain and making sure that our collective story of resistance is centralised, emphasising the connection we all felt. I feel that I have been able to do this, in this inquiry and in other writings.

I also learnt a considerable amount about what it means to be defined in a particular way, whether as a 'victim', a 'patient', a 'therapist', a 'facilitator' or a 'researcher'. These words can

seem innocuous or loaded, depending on our relationship with them. The same can be said for the words I have used above; the language of 'better social worlds' and 'acts of resistance' seemed to have resonance with the women in this inquiry, but maybe this is because of the relationship we had with each other, rather than the words. Perhaps the relational context has been the central theme of this inquiry.

At the very least, I hope that I have demonstrated how reflecting on the themes and the relationships embedded within this inquiry (such as the theme of *doing research as an act of resistance*) has helped to shape my practice and way of being. I consider that this last theme speaks more to my personal 'journey' than anything else and this is where I move towards in the epilogue to this thesis; telling a story of 'becoming' a reflexive, practice-based researcher, in relation to (and with) the women I was (am) in solidarity with.

Epilogue

Becoming a researcher as (an act of) resistance

Vivien Burr (2003) says that (what we call) knowledge “...*simply refers to the particular construction or version of a phenomenon that has received the stamp of truth in our society*” (Burr, 2003, p. 68). This could be used as an argument about what constitutes research, and therefore, what constitutes a researcher. If the researcher is using language that has been given the ‘stamp of truth’, using a method from what has already been called ‘research’, within a discourse that accepts research as a ‘thing’, then this ‘thing called research’ may be seen as valid. Knowledge is therefore constructed and maintained within the agreed parameters of the status quo; and ideas of knowing are attached to pre-conceived notions of what is already ‘known’. How then can things move on, to expand the parameters of ‘knowledge’?

From a feminist perspective, Belenky et al. (1986) story ‘*women’s ways of knowing*’ as distinguishable between connected and separated knowing. Feminist writers and researchers, they suggest, generally highlight the *relational* aspects of knowing, which can be contrary to the dominant stories that people are surrounded by through their lives. This, they suggest, is one way to ‘*move to the story on*’ (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

Recently, my own work was reviewed, and that review was published in the same journal where my paper had previously featured. The author of this review paper, Jarl Wahlstrom (2017), asked himself (and therefore, the reader) this very question: ‘*what in the end might be the benefit of doing qualitative research in mental health?*’ He also struggled with an answer to this complex question: what is the value of research (in this particular field) and how do we move it on? I confess that I was somewhat flattered when he concluded that “*perhaps, as Salter might put it – to find new ways to ‘go on’*” (Wahlstrom, 2017, p. 108).

Beyond my initial position of flattery, I notice a more important point. Doing research in mental health and expanding the repertoire of what it means to be involved in research in this field *does* speak to notions of 'going on'. I hear this as not so much to enable the systems I represent (academia and mental health care) to 'go on', but to enable people's stories of resistance; and ongoing challenges to social injustice to 'go on', to develop and thrive. This offers a more hopeful story of 'becoming a researcher', one that makes me feel more comfortable with my relationship to power. I wonder if that is too easy though, *too* comfortable?

In the process of *this* inquiry I have been aware of (and engaged in) a relationship with (and between) knowledge *and* power that is so multilayered that it leaves me spinning at times and looking for the more obvious corners to pull down to have a peep beneath. The most interesting layer, for me, has been my own *personal* relationship to power (and knowledge) and to the institutions that embody, some might say *colonise*, such grand narratives. Being an outsider to the world of research when I began this voyage and now being *part* of the system that I am writing from within and about, is not dissimilar to my voyage through the clinical landscape. Both of these territories are becoming more familiar to me in many ways, but in other ways, I feel even more outside *of* them and more uncomfortable *with* them, because of the relationship to power that these worlds invite.

In considering this, I am aware not only of the relationships I choose to build with colleagues, peers, supervisors etc., but also with the institutions, the physical environment and with the wider contexts that help shape them. It is no coincidence that I have quoted news items in my thesis, as we are constantly influenced by what is going on around us as we go about our daily practices as practitioners and researchers, engaging in 'acts of resistance'.

In turn (and in direct relationship with my research question), this has made me think deeply and widely about how my practice is being shaped by my inquiry and how my inquiry is being

shaped by my practice, alongside the everyday and grand narratives that I am part of, am influenced *by*, and am influencing. Beyond this, I am interested in how this moves the discourse on, within the wider academic, research and practice communities that I am part of. The story I then tell myself is that how I engage in research needs to be in an *intimate* relationship with how I engage in therapy practices and how I engage in the world. This is *why* and *how* I started to think and frame *what* I am engaged in (as a researcher) as an act of 'resistance'.

Having papers published *has* felt like an important marker for me in moving from the more private world of therapy into the more public world of research, but it also takes me (more definitely) into the world of academia, a movement that has not come without discomfort. It forces me to confront my own status and position of privilege. It has, however, provided the opportunity for my contributions to local practices (that speak to resistance) to contribute to a wider (global) discourse of social justice, through writing. It is therefore (like most intimate connections), a complicated relationship, feeling both necessary and pretentious, liberating and disconcerting.

Writing into social justice

There has been a significant interest in the idea of writing as inquiry over recent years (see Laurel Richardson, 2005; Elizabeth Adams St Pierre, 2017; and Gail Simon, 2011, for example) and I can relate to the experiences of Richardson and Adams St Pierre who note that we are often taught to not start writing before we think we know what it is we are trying to say. Adams St Pierre (2017) explicitly encourages those involved in research to '*break the habit of rushing to pre-existing research methodologies*' and, instead, to '*follow the provocations that come from everywhere in the inquiry that is living and writing*'. I took this invitation literally in the development of the five-step inquiry and am fully appreciative of the encouragement to do this. In this inquiry (similarly to these authors), it *has* been a moving and organic process, where the

words have 'come into being' *through* the process of writing. At the beginning of writing this thesis, I did not 'know' that I would write about writing; but I felt inclined to notice and honour its emergence in my thinking by writing *about* it. Does this perhaps, in some way, speak to a responsiveness and spontaneity that John Shotter may encourage as a way to "...*live immersed within the unbroken stream of the everyday, language, communicative, social activities occurring continuously amongst us all, as human beings, as human becomings, living out our lives together immersed also in a larger world that is still, as far as we can tell, in the process of becoming...*"? (Shotter, 2016, p.126).

Being involved in storytelling groups within my current field of practice has been shaped considerably by what I am reading, engaging in, benefitting from myself, *becoming*. I am as much in flow and flux as any of the people I am in conversation with, as I grow through this process.

Research, as a mode of resistance, offers a story of voice and visibility. I have experienced being silenced in my life (as have many women) and the papers I have written represent 'finding voice', giving me the platform from which I could legitimately 'speak out'. In this chapter, therefore, I am paying attention to the process of 'becoming' a practice-based researcher, and how that has impacted on my practice and ways of being in the world.

Personally political

In his doctoral research, Per Jensen (2008) suggests that there is little literature that pays attention to these kinds of connections; not just connections (he suggests) but *patterns* of connections. If I were to draw a parallel between my own story and the stories of invisibility and visibility, I would have plenty of material to draw on, as a woman, as a practitioner, as a wife, a daughter, friend, and colleague.

The ones that come into the light in this moment, are current ones and ones from my early

experiences of being in this world. This is not very different to what might happen in a therapy session; something is sparked and an early memory surfaces, usually connected to the current context.

As a girl, like many other women, I was taught that being quiet was the preferred mode for girls and young women. I recall an example that my mother also recollects in her letters to me through this inquiry (another pattern of connection). I was about nine or ten years old and I desperately wanted a denim jacket, like other girls in my class and like my best friend at the time. My father did not think that this particular garment was feminine 'enough' for his daughter, and he refused to buy one. He bought me instead pink dungarees and a white T-shirt with different pastel coloured patterns. I remember it vividly and remember how much I hated it. I have never worn pink since (other than when running the 'Race for Life' where wearing pink is a way to express solidarity with other women), and this is one way that I continue to do resistance, by not wearing a colour that is so readily associated (for me) with 'girlhood', and one which I did not choose for myself.

I remember at the time the silencing practices of my mother and the shop assistant (who had clearly got the measure of my father's mood and persistence) and how they gave the message that it would be best that I just 'do as I was told'. Even though my mother agreed with me that I should have a denim jacket, she wanted to avoid a (more than) awkward (potentially risky) standoff with my father. The assistant and my mother stopped my crying, telling me that it was better that I just accepted that I would not get the denim jacket. My mother, later, bought me the jacket. This was *absolutely* an act of resistance.

This might seem an insignificant example in comparison to the other stories that feature in this collection of writings, but it was significant for me at the time *and* now, not because of the event per se, but because of the context that it represented. My mother did not have equal voice to my

father and I did not have equal voice to my brother, for whom my father bought a denim jacket (not because he had asked for one, but as a deliberate way to provoke my mother in a similar, but not equal, way that she bought me one to provoke him). This was the relationship they had, and, of course, my brother and I were caught up in that. In and of itself, this is a trivial story, and without the relational context this is how it may be seen, but I was not just 'being good'; I was (directly) being taught to comply *and* I was also (indirectly) learning how to resist.

How does this connect with my research, and with my practice? Paying attention to (levels of) choice and voice, and how that shows itself, has been central to facilitating groups *and* facilitating research that has developed from an awareness of shared experiences of abuses of power, *and* which is being played out within a hierarchical structure such as a health service provision. This is not an equal relationship either, and nor are the ones that are represented in academia. I *continue* to have to find ways to comply whilst *also* resisting in order to survive the systems I find myself in; as do many of my/our colleagues.

Further local connections

There is also another connection with this story and the subject of my practice and research. My denim-wearing friend in this story, many years later (and after we had lost touch through our teenage years), took her own life. A few years later, another friend from the same year group in school died the same way. I am told that the former left a letter stating that she could not live with the shame and guilt she felt. I have since had contact with the family of the latter who had no idea why she was so unhappy or why she made this decision. They were left confused and devastated. I do not know what stories of shame either of these young women carried with them, whether they were gendered stories, personal stories, stories of abuse or stories that connect with other discourses of shame, but I have often wondered about it. My oldest and dearest friend, Nicola, now herself a systemic counsellor, also lost a good friend in the same

way (at a later stage) and I wonder how much the community (the world) that we both grew up in was/is part of these tragic stories.

Connected to this, my supervisor, Billy Hardy, and I have been writing (Hardy and Salter, in progress) about the connections we make between practice and personal experiences and current/local news. We took a snapshot of the local news in south Wales over a one-month period, paying attention to stories of personal and interpersonal violence, including violence to self, sexual violence and intimate partner violence. In this short period, we were left dumbstruck by how many people's lives in our (relatively) small community had been devastated by violence, and how unsafe a place our communities may feel for many. Finding ways to resist violence and the discourse of violence is a complex but extremely important one.

As part of this project, we talked about some of the stories we have heard/witnessed of abuses within the systems we work in. Billy told me a story of a psychiatrist who, coincidentally, worked in both the island community where I worked and in the area of Wales where I now currently work. This psychiatrist is now dead, so there will never be a possibility for conviction but it is nearly 30 years since the alleged abuse took place and new information is being released at this stage. The abuse that this man was part of was abusing the prescribing rules for adolescents in residential homes. We allowed ourselves space to be outraged and disturbed by this story.

We then talked about a psychiatrist who was (at that time) in the news facing allegations of sexual abuse from his male patients. We both knew one of those patients, who later died. He killed himself after killing his wife and four children, two of whom were living with disabilities, and would have been well known to services. I had been their 'babysitter' some years before and had tucked them up in bed and told them bed time stories. It is a personal and disturbing story that (as you might imagine) touched me deeply. It happened about 20 years ago, but sadly it is not a story that resides solely in the past. These kinds of stories, unhappily, continue.

I wrote this poem as a kind of 'act of resistance' at the time of this inquiry, as a way to express some of the emotion that I continue to feel in relation to this, and other, tragic stories of violence. It is pacier and blunter than my usual poetry, demonstrating a sense of urgency and the brutality of the story that has left its mark on/in me.

Resist The Rot

shaken from suburban slumber

a battle cry, akin to thunder

the brutal noise of fist on face

out of sight, and out of place

pristine paths a thin facade

leading up the manicured yard

towards the door that leads inside

come on in, there's nothing to hide

a family just like every other

hard working father, devoted mother

children laugh, engrossed in play

the mundane sound of every day

shattered by this final act

of love and devotion, a secret pact

unknown to all but this family man

who takes their lives because he can

because he has the 'right' to choose

who will today, their young life lose

those who have, to him, betrayed

and those who have to then be saved

saved from fear by the ultimate violence

returning the house to suburban silence

their bodies lie still, quietly rotting

soon to be, again, forgotten

the silent surrender to violent brutality

the ultimate crime is the sickening reality

that they're just more victims to be forgot

if we give in to this creeping rot

.....

Connecting with practice

I notice when writing *my* stories of resistance, like 'the pink dungarees', that my heart was/*is* beating a little faster than usual, adrenaline moving my fingers faster over the keyboard. This is, I think, a legacy, a remnant of fear about 'telling', following a discourse of silence when I am still not sure if I have permission to let this out, or indeed whose permission I need to seek. My father's? My mother's? My own? My community? Or maybe it is the 'academy' – an 'invisible

presence’ – whose power I worry could further silence me and others who have contributed, by not seeing this as valid ‘research’?

Doing research, for me, has (in and of itself) been an act of defiance, of resistance, marking that shift from private to public and having the courage of my convictions to speak out about the abuses I see and have experienced. Whilst I have had my doubts about entering into the world of academia and how this relates to power, I have also felt *empowered* to speak in ways that I have not previously experienced. The relevance of this connects me with a conversation my cohort and I had with John Shotter over Skype, a few months before he died, in 2016.

We had all been touched by the recent killing in England of Labour MP, Jo Cox, by someone who associated his act with extreme-right politics. This act of violence had affected many people in the UK and beyond. We had been talking about it as a group, noticing the pain we felt at this news. When we were talking with John he was seated in his study, a private library with countless books all around him. He was talking with us about the evidence-based systems we all work in, within what we might call a wider neo-liberal culture. I wrote down what he said.

John Methodology is important. It makes the evidence-based agenda political and speaks to what is going on in the world currently... This is why I'm sat here amongst all these fucking books.

I stopped breathing for a moment. His words hung in the air. They hung around long enough to find a place in my notes, and to find a place within me. I have told this story to others and it continues to stay with me. This, too, is a story of resistance.

“This is why I am sat here amongst all these fucking books.”

Suddenly, I get it! I *get* why reading, writing, inquiring, researching, doing something as weird (if you come from my family, and my community) as doing a doctorate might have an impact, and I

get why I am doing it, now, in this moment. Because I cannot *not* do it. I cannot not say what I need to say. This is my way to do activism, to be part of a change, to tell stories that *need* to be told. It is not just vanity, however much that doubt raises its head; insists on being heard.

Telling stories of resistance

I have told *this* story about John twice now. I told it at a research workshop with colleagues from Wales, and later at a conference in the Lake District, on a walk up a mountain with colleagues within the systemic practice field. I enjoyed telling the story and I felt/still feel connected to it. I think I like telling it because it spoke to *me* so much that I hope it will speak to others. I also hope that people will develop their own meaning and take the story forward. Maybe someone might tell a story about hearing me tell the story, and so the story goes on. I have not always told stories, and I still feel very self-conscious doing so. I do not think I am a natural storyteller, though I like to write, which is one (a different) way to tell stories. I do not think I really understood the difference until recently, when I was already involved in a storytelling group – telling stories is a different process to writing stories. It involves hearing the storyteller's voice in a different kind of way. I have tried to encapsulate some of that traditional, oral storytelling ethos in my writing since; inviting the reader to 'listen' in a way that perhaps they can imagine where the breaths are, where the emphasis is placed. Storytelling and story listening have been important features in my therapy practice and they have featured more prominently in this research than I might have imagined. These following quotes might demonstrate why that might be; how stories connect and enhance feelings of solidarity.

"Stories gather people around them" (Plummer, 1995: 174).

"For narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear; ...for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics" (Plummer 1995:87).

Reissman (2001) takes this further to say that stories ‘dialectically’ connect people and indeed social movements, including “...*historically ‘defiled’ groups (rape victims, gays and lesbians)*”. She also says that “*storytelling is a relational activity that gathers others to listen and empathize. It is a collaborative practice*” (Reissman, 2001, p. 369). I could not agree more, and my experience of being in storytelling groups and being in this inquiry confirms this for me. It confirms what I have always ‘known’; that ‘stories matter’ in people’s lives.

My grandfather was an *epic* storyteller. His name was Bill and he told wild and wonderful stories of him being ‘Billy the kid’, ‘Wild Bill Hitchcock’, and the person who really caught ‘Moby Dick’. He never seemed to tire of telling these stories and we never seemed to tire of hearing them. He died when I was 13, so I didn’t know him as an adult. I wonder how his stories might have changed, as I changed, and as our relationship changed. I recall how intensely he told the stories; and though he had a twinkle in his eye he told them like he believed them, like they were real. I am certain I believed, for many years, that he had been this extraordinary man who had lived so many lives. I wonder now, when I tell stories through research, and stories of meaning making, what constitutes a ‘true’ story. It seems that there is a fine line between autobiography and fiction. What does the fiction writer draw on if not personal experience? And what would the autobiographer lose if they never told anyone’s story other than their own?

When my grandfather told his stories, I never felt lied to, betrayed or conned. I had entered into a world that was part make-believe and part truth. The truth was perhaps more visible in the *intent* of the story, and the relationship between a grandfather and his grandchildren; the make-believe was perhaps more visible in the *content*, or the detail.

In developing *my* interests in storytelling and creative writing over the last year or more, I have noticed how this is connected with what I have been engaged in (and discovered about myself) through this process of inquiry. I have learnt that telling stories develops potential for being more

visible and active in the world.

To tell somebody *else's* story, in a research frame, is a position of responsibility and it also tells different stories within the wider narrative, a story of relationship, a story of lived experience, a story of time and place *and* a blend of *intent* and *content*. In this inquiry, there is considerable *truth* in both elements though I may use different mechanisms to convey them. These are, perhaps, uncomfortable truths. There are many uncomfortable and difficult decisions that have been made throughout this inquiry which have been about presenting truth alongside protecting anonymity. This is part of the ethical responsibility of the researcher but also a story of relationship between myself and the women in this inquiry. I might be the storyteller in this instance, but I have previously been a story 'curator', both of which come with multiple levels of responsibility. The responsibility of truth is but one, but it is an important one.

The truth

The truth can never be 'known'

It can only be told in a story

Words on the wind, wild blown

Bellow for justice, full fury

The depth of passion and rage

Free spoken, untamed, untethered

Too complex for lines on a page

To vast to be numbered and measured

So I wonder, is this my calling?

To find a way through the toxic mist

Despite risk of failure and falling

An opportunity that cannot be missed

.....

Some reflections on truth and transparency

The story of sexual abuse of women (like in the island community where I worked) is shocking and should make *everyone* feel uncomfortable; it should be a story that is told, not just curated. Whilst I am not suggesting that island communities are the *only* places where this happens, these communities (as do other closed communities) can offer a kind of shelter for abusers and a barrier for the potential for justice. Perhaps even more shocking though, is the response to the abuse, and the response to anyone who tries to bring injustice to light, to tell their 'truth'. There can be severe consequences for such an action. Competent, able and ethical people (often women) have lost their jobs as a result (as I have discussed earlier in this thesis). This is also a story that needs to be told, but with caution.

As previously noted, the reason I do not name the island in this thesis is not to protect the *island* (or myself) but to protect the women who live there, who shared their stories with me. There is a positive legacy attached to the group programme that I was part of setting up that continues to support other women. The women who I have spoken with and quote in this thesis are very much part of that legacy. I do not want to make that invisible but I also do not want to jeopardise its potential to go on. They would not want me to.

However, this presented a very real challenge in terms of transparency of which I have talked so

much about in this thesis and in other writing (Salter, 2017a). In 'Getting Lost', Patti Lather talks of '*coming clean*' (2007) in relation to feminist research and has given me/us the notion of failure as '*inevitable*' in such methodology. I am not sure if I would go as far as to say that I have *completely* failed in my bid for transparency or in my aim to present what I have learnt from conversations with others through the process of my inquiry, but I have *certainly* felt muddled, confused, and '*lost*'. I still do. I am not fully satisfied with what I have done, what I have '*become*'. It is full of tension. I feel disconnected, discomforted, all at sea.

Lost at sea

My colleague and fellow practitioner-researcher, Steve Mills (in our many conversations as a cohort), has picked up on 'bewilderment' as an important concept for him, from John Shotter's vast body of work. '*Difficulties of orientation*' is another way that John Shotter has language this kind of 'muddle' (2008). It is a relational, ethical, responsive and profound problem. How can I (and others) re-present the voices and stories of others in a truthful way whilst protecting the identity of those who have shared their stories? How can I tell culturally nuanced stories without naming the cultural and geographical context?

"What is happening now has significance – in these surroundings. The surroundings give it its importance." (Wittgenstein, 1953; in Shotter, J. 2016, p. 166).

I have felt compelled, in this body of writing, to *re-present* the stories I have heard (I see it as my responsibility) and yet I struggle with how to do that in the least failure-riddled way. If I were to present these stories to the reader in a way that is the least altered, edited and muddled with my own voice then this may seem more pure, more honest, more ethical. I might be able to create the environment for the women I have spoken with to be heard without adding my interpretation, which could be argued as using my power to change and edit, and to make myself look clever. I could be seen to have used these conversations (and the women I have been speaking with) for

my own gain – colluding with the system in order to join it or to be an academic. This bothers me. I am not exaggerating when I say that it gives me sleepless nights and half-asleep dreams full of angst. The five-step inquiry was developed with this in mind. It was designed to give me space to ‘work with’ the conversations I had been part of, to pay attention to the content of what was said, but also, and importantly, to pay attention to my own responses and the relationship between us. I also needed to pay attention to the power dynamic that becoming a researcher invites.

Reflections on learning to become a researcher

My position as (what could be seen as) the editor of these stories and primary author of this body of work might suggest that what my co-researchers have told me is/has been less valid than what I have to say about it, and how I interpret it; putting *my* name to it, as if it were belonging to me in my new position of authority, as a researcher. As a white woman who is learning that she is now in the world of academia and is therefore, by definition, privileged. A woman who can no longer honestly call herself working class. Of course, I will get (have got) this wrong, but this is a massively subjective statement, which others may disagree with.

Wanda Pillow (2003) notes a shift in the attention paid by researchers into their *own* subjectivity in the research process but also critiques ‘*comfortable* reflexivity’ which relies on a gentle exploration of self (of the researcher) within a qualitative inquiry. She calls instead for more ‘*uncomfortable*’ reflexivity, fore-fronting complexity, a ‘disruptive’ rather than ‘transparent’ process. Daphne Patai (1994) offers a similar critique of the emphasis on reflexivity as a methodology and argues that “...*we do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly*” (p.70). Patti Lather (2007) offers a differing position but also ‘shares a concern’ for what she calls a ‘*dominant confessional, psychoanalyzing approach to self-reflexivity*’.

Pat Mahony and Christine Zmroczek (2004) remind us that ‘class matters’ in the business of research and question the validity of white middle-class women naming their position as one of oppression rather than one of privilege. I agree and am conscious of this in my use of self *throughout* this inquiry. This is why I continue to both name my own experiences of abuse and oppression as an act of solidarity *and* to name that (as Vikki Reynolds suggests, 2014) as an *imperfect* alliance, critically examining my own experiences as ones that could be described as oppression, but could also be described as oppressive. This does not mean that I should invalidate my experiences in the same way that I would not invalidate the experience of other women who have had experiences of privilege *alongside* experiences of oppression. ‘Critical exploration’ in this case is part of the story of reflexivity. I do not share the same stories of abuse and oppression as many of the women I have worked with, and been in conversation with, and I do not pretend to. I have my own unique stories, some which are more associated with narratives of oppression and some that are more associated with narratives of privilege.

Research as colonisation

“‘Research’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p.1).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith offers a significant challenge to the concept of research *on* people who have experienced oppression and subjugation; and a perturbing and important critique of Western notions of research and knowledge from her position of an indigenous and ‘colonised’ Māori woman.

She rejects the language of ‘*post-colonialism*’ as it might suggest that colonialism is history when it continues to have a profound impact on indigenous peoples around the world and on the academic community. I cannot help but agree. Critiquing the *nature* of research can perhaps

go *some* way to disrupt the *power* of research that has its roots in segregation and oppression; it is a further way to continue a ‘them and us’ story, a different kind of ‘silencing’, where people are heard and seen only through a particular, privileged lens.

Current context

Literally as I am about to ‘go-to press’ with this thesis, in the final weeks before submission, the IICSA (Independent Inquiry into Childhood Sexual Abuse) released its long awaited report into historic child migration programmes. This report openly criticises Her Majesty’s Government (HMG) for the previous policy of child migration and makes the recommendation that all child migrants are now financially compensated by HMG. It also recommends that organisations involved in implementing the migration programmes offer apologies to those child migrants, many of whom were subsequently ‘victims’ of systemic childhood sexual abuse. The chair of the inquiry, Professor Alexis Jay, said that the (UK) government policy of child migration was “...a deeply flawed government policy that was badly implemented by numerous organisations which sent children as young as five years old abroad”. She also says that “successive British governments failed to ensure there were sufficient measures in place to protect children from all forms of abuse, including sexual abuse. The policy was allowed to continue despite evidence over many years showing that children were suffering.” (Independent Inquiry into Childhood Sexual Abuse, 2018).

This, for me, highlights again that these ‘historic’ stories do not reside solely in the past; they are part of the *context* for current stories of abuse which continue to dominate the headlines. For example (also at the time of writing), global NGOs such as Oxfam, Plan International and Save The Children (usually associated with the protection of children) have been in the news because of allegations of a failure to fully investigate cases of abuse from staff and volunteers towards children and vulnerable adults in the (overseas) communities they have been sent into to help.

Closer to home (for me), in July 2017, the news also highlighted the outcome of the review into children's homes on Jersey, another British island, similar to the one I previously worked on. This is now in the public domain so I will make no attempt to hide the location of this island. The shock of this review (for me) was the lack of shock that it invoked. I hardly heard anybody talk about it. We have come to expect these kinds of stories. The report says that hundreds of the most vulnerable children living in this island community were abused whilst in the 'care' of the authorities, the corporate parents, and much more recently than the stories of child migrants. The report goes on to say that hundreds more children may continue to be at risk, *now*. The factors they cite include collusion by senior members of staff with politicians to keep the issue quiet and a desire to maintain the status quo, referred to as 'the Jersey way'. This sounds very familiar. The view of Graham Power, former Chief Officer, States of Jersey Police (SOJP), was that a disproportionate amount of power in Jersey was concentrated in the hands of a few people who resisted change on principle. This also, sounds all too familiar.

"Many witnesses told us that, as children, they did not feel able to report abuse because they felt that they would not be believed."

*"A number of disclosures of sexual abuse were made during the 1980s to a staff member (of the home), who took **no** action."* (Jersey Care Inquiry, 2017)

The day the report was released into the public domain, there was a programme scheduled on BBC1 in respect of the Rochdale inquiry in 2013. In this programme, women who were the children involved in this case told their story, in their own words. A major theme was how they had not been believed/listened to or taken seriously, a double betrayal/abuse. The social, socio-economic backgrounds of the children was one of the major contributors to them not being believed. They were seen as being 'troubled' and 'troubling' children rather than 'victims' of abuse.

Women who had been on the 'frontline' of working with and listening to these children and young women also told their story. This also mostly focused on not being believed/listened to/taken seriously. In this documentary, Sara Rowbotham, now known as the 'whistle blower', but then a senior manager of a crisis intervention team in sexual health, tells investigators that she reported 181 cases of sexual exploitation to the police and other authorities in her time as manager from 2004 to 2014. The level of determination to keep going with her concerns in the face of apathy (perhaps worse) is astounding, and this brought its own legacy. She lost her job and her health was impacted.

It reminds me of the conversation I had with my colleague, Janey, as part of this inquiry, which I have discussed earlier. The similarities are obvious and disturbing. Writing about this is bound up with my own relationship to action and inaction, justice and injustice, historically and currently. In turn, the concern I have for social justice is connected with my own story and my own experiences of shame when I have not done what I felt I should have done, and not said what I felt I should have said or taken direct action when it was required. Writing about this is a form of action, on my part, but my struggle is that I am never sure that this is enough.

Continuing to be involved in writing and research helps me (in part) to move towards that.

For example, I have been in contact recently with the Dulwich (Narrative Therapy) Centre who are currently calling for women involved in narrative practices to *connect* during, what the website says, is a time where the importance of feminist thinking in narrative practices appears to be 'fading' in some areas of practice. They have launched this in the wake of the #MeToo campaign, and are particularly interested in intersectionality.

Additionally, other women (psychotherapists) are involved in gathering authors together to offer a collective voice of solidarity alongside women who may come into therapy following experiences of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation/harassment/violence. I have also been in

touch with these women, and am excited as to where this may lead; whatever that might be.

This is one of the 'outcomes' of the inquiry – that it positions me in a way that my contributions might be heard; and add to other voices. Whether or not this feels 'enough' is another matter.

Enough is a big word for me, and I do not know if I can ever say I have done 'enough', but at least I can be 'honest' about it.

Transparency as a response to injustice

Transparency, for me is not necessarily about deliberate self-disclosure (despite some of the choices I have made throughout this inquiry); it is part of an active choice to not withhold knowledge (knowledge in its widest sense). Transparency on the part of the facilitator and researcher can be part of a story of challenging notions of knowledge and power, where the idea of the facilitator and/or researcher as the only 'holder of knowledge' is challenged from within. As such, it has a relationship with wider ethical dimensions of power, solidarity and social action. As a woman, talking with other women who have experienced abuse, being transparent about my views, ethical positioning, prejudices and personal experiences of oppression in relation to that is not just about 'joining' in order to make a quick connection. It is also a 'joint action' (Shotter, 2011) or 'joint enterprise' (Wenger, 1998); not a theoretical concept, but a way of *being*.

The following paragraphs have been developed from writing (2017b) that has been previously published. I connected with ideas of transparency early on in the inquiry. It did not emerge as a theme in itself, but it featured heavily in my conversation with Julia. We had talked about what it means to be part of a group, and how that might shift preconceived ideas of being 'the therapist' or 'the facilitator', and how this might lead to more sharing of personal stories. I was initially just interested in this as a 'thing' that I had noticed about my own way of being in a group, then subsequently, I was interested in Julia's similar perspective. This developed then into thinking

about what this meant in relation to 'doing witness', and stories of resistance. I began to think about it as a way to resist 'them and us' kind of stories; and then reconnected with other stories of transparency.

Transparency as an act of resistance

Janine Roberts (2005), in her writing, invites psychotherapists to engage with 'transparency and disclosure', suggesting that this offers both opportunity and risk. I was interested in this and noticed (in searching the literature) that much of the research in the field defines self-disclosure as a purposeful act of revealing personal information (e.g. Constantine and Kwan, 2003).

However, transparency may also refer to the everyday transmission of personal information that is 'given off' by the therapist in their communication, their presentation and general way of being (Breckbill, 2014; Knox and Hill, 2003; Zur, 2011). Another way to story it is that transparency is part of our way of being with others and, I would argue, can be relationally framed. Harlene Anderson has referred to this (2009) as 'being public'. In this way, it is not so much about deliberate purposeful acts of self-disclosure (sharing personal stories) but making thoughts, intentions, inner conversations etc. more visible, in a 'mutual inquiry'. I can connect with this. Anne, in our conversation, suggested that she did not think it necessary for a facilitator to share personal stories of themselves but it was necessary for us to be open and transparent.

Anne ... For me, you're sharing yourself by be[ing] with us. You don't have to say anything about yourselves. [Being there] shows me that you care about what's happening, so that to me it is you sharing yourself...

I think Anne is talking about the *difference* between self-disclosure and transparency, the second being more important, for her. For others, though, knowing certain personal information about their therapist or facilitator may be key in being able to develop trust. As an example, working as I did (some time ago) in a children's charity, working with parents who have been

referred for parenting advice and support, with the emphasis (from the referring body) being on parenting *deficit*, the context brought certain questions to the fore. I was often asked if I had children (which I do not) and often this presented a potential barrier to trust that needed to be named and attended to. For many parents, this did not matter, but for others it was extremely important. In addition, avoiding the question (which in my early years of practice I certainly tried to do) often represented a missed opportunity to understand why this information would be relationally significant and to have a dialogue about differences, similarities and power. The issue for many parents in this context was not that I did not have children, but that I was given the authority (by job title, status and the context of the organisation) to comment on *their* parenting, as if I were some sort of 'expert'. Whilst I may never have claimed to be such a thing, the context supported that definition. If I had (at that time) the language and space to talk about this more openly, I think we could have co-created a more useful definition, one that could begin to speak to solidarity.

Research as solidarity

Linda Bell (1989, p. 116) says that traditional ethical theories “...*do little to challenge oppression and violence ... (and) ethics (of freedom) must condemn systems of oppression as well as individual acts violating the freedom of other*”. I think this is ‘missing a trick’. Research can not only be transformative for those taking part in research but can also be transformative for academia, in turning ‘traditional’ ideas of research on its head and by being anti-oppressive, de-colonising and de-subjugating. As my first steps into research, my own project may not demonstrate this to its full potential. It may not be as ‘radical’ as it could be; *but* I can position myself in solidarity with other researchers to offer a collective story of change, where it might be seen as ‘radical enough’ by association.

Vikki Reynolds (2014) uses the concept of the 'rhizome' to develop a non-hierarchical approach to practices as therapist, activist, supervisor. The rhizome is a plant that grows horizontally, beneath the surface of the ground, and from whose roots grow new plants. Reynolds develops this concept from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work, and it has become integrated with her practice of solidarity.

Unrelated to this (I was unaware of Vikki's work before I developed the group work programme for women who have been sexually abused), the group I developed and facilitated in the island community has used the image and metaphor of the aspen tree. These trees grow in colonies or communities with root systems that are long-living and able to sustain and regenerate even after fire has destroyed the vegetation above ground. We have found this a helpful metaphor for 'going on' after abuse and the network of support that develops through coming together as a group. It is also a helpful way to think about research, as potentially generative, sustaining and connecting.

This has been an exceptional learning point for me, one that I did not necessarily predict, an unintended and welcomed outcome. It speaks to both solidarity (with each other, and a wider community) and offers a challenge to the dominant discourses that can continue to oppress and silence. It speaks to resistance. This is what connects all of these stories. It brings ethics into the light; foregrounding the 'why' bit of the inquiry, more so than the 'what' and the 'how'.

In this chapter then, I have revisited the *reasons* for engaging in a systemic inquiry, and have offered a rationale for how research can be seen as an act of resistance. I have positioned myself centrally as a practitioner-researcher, working within a methodological frame of narrative inquiry and borrowing from autoethnography as a way to be more transparent and present in the overall inquiry. The central premise is that there is merit in an invitation to see research as a further act of resistance and justice doing, particularly when working with people who have

experienced oppression; and within a context that otherwise privileges individualised stories of ill health. This is what the conversations I had with the women in this inquiry have taught me, and what I will take with me as I form my own future that is likely to include further acts of resistance at both a practice and research level. In exploring this, I found it helpful to revisit my original research question, which I invite the reader to also hold in mind as we 'go on' together in this next chapter.

A review

The question I asked myself at the beginning of this inquiry was, “how might the exploration of collective narratives inform systemic practice, research and social action; and how might this loop back to personal and social responsibility for the systemic practitioner?”

Reflecting on the *whole* process, I have used this question to consider what I have learnt, and what has moved me along the way, paying attention to the recursivity involved in such a reflexive inquiry. I have also considered the contributions this inquiry might make to the wider professional community as well as the communities in which the interventions took shape, namely by noting the impact on the women involved in this inquiry. I have reflected also on what I might do differently if I were to engage in a process such as this in the future. This has been (interestingly) one of the more challenging reflections; which led to another layer of reflection.

Being someone who considers herself to be responsive and reflexive, and not so process or structure driven, I often accept that the way things turned out as the way they needed to be because, whatever it was, it was based on an honest and authentic interaction. I consider that I am being reflexive in that interaction and reflecting after the event may not necessarily suggest that I would do it differently the next time. I also consider that in the process of this inquiry, I was so immersed in it that I gave as much of my attention and put as much thought into it at the time that I could. Therefore, reflecting back (on the process of it), I am not sure that I could have done much more; though time and distance may offer a different (back and forth) perspective. In this chapter, I am trying to honour that ability to ‘look back’ and ‘move forward’. I am also paying attention here to some of the obvious and some less obvious contributions of the inquiry, encapsulated in the table below (over the next three pages). This is a ‘snapshot’ of the stories of transformation I have heard/been part of, and the impact this has had on those of us involved and the impact this could have on the wider community.

Contributions to the wider community	Impact on and from the women involved	Impact on me/stuff that happened	Impact on my practice
The research has put forward that responsive and relationally sensitive group work with women who have experienced abuse and oppression offers a de-privatising alternative to individualised 'treatment' that can contribute to a discourse of psychopathology.	Julia continues to work with families in disadvantaged communities; NOT running state sanctioned parenting groups.	Through the time of being engaged in this inquiry, I moved house three times. I am now living back in Wales, having left the island where I helped to set up services for women who have been sexually abused.	As a family therapist, I have noticed that I am more likely to think about the impact of social injustice and oppression when talking with families; even when this is not obvious as a theme that families bring.
This inquiry offers the community the opportunity to see narrative practices (that provide women with space to talk about experiences of abuse) as a way to enable collective transformation and contribute to justice doing.	Janey has retired but is doing some teaching. She no longer lives in the island community and has no intention to return.	I ate too much chocolate, put on weight and joined two gyms. I have had physio on my shoulder, back and hips – consequences of stooping over and carrying a laptop everywhere. I felt the irony of talking about the importance of nature in my life whilst sat attached to a computer.	I have developed a storytelling group for women (in Wales) for them to share stories of resourcefulness and resistance within a system that usually privileges stories of diagnosis. I have also developed a creativity group.
I have offered the wider community a model of conversational inquiry, increasing research options for the systemic inquirer.	Lucy, with our colleague Emma, continues to facilitate groups for women who have been sexually abused. She also supports Anne, Laura, Anna and Linda in developing peer support groups.	I attended six funerals and learnt about the death of two people I had previously met with in a therapy context, who took their own lives. I often felt sad but also learnt much about hope.	I have been working locally with the Welsh Refugee Council to support staff working with asylum seekers and refugees. We are developing ways to resist burnout by being in solidarity.

Conversational inquiry offers multiple opportunities for reflection for the systemic practitioner; <i>and</i> multiple opportunities for conversational partners to engage in transformative storytelling.	Anna drew a self-portrait as she sees herself now compared to before the group. She filled in what she previously saw as an empty body. Anna continues to work towards developing peer support services for women like her who have experienced sexual abuse.	I reconnected with family and old friends having moved back to Wales. I learnt new things about solidarity by being with people I love.	I am engaged in a local research project with my supervisor, paying attention to local stories of violence to self and others, learning about the impact this has on our communities.
The development of a five-step model of inquiry also offers a contribution towards what is on offer as a mode of 'analysis', or 'further inquiry'. It promotes embodied, responsive practices as a way to 'do solidarity' and maintain reflexivity within a research frame.	Linda tells me that before attending the group that she felt like a 'zombie', and felt 'apart' from others. She now feels a part of something and works in solidarity with Anna, Lucy, Laura and Anne to develop peer support services.	I talked with my mother about things we have rarely talked about and learnt much about mother and daughter solidarity.	I have been working with community (voluntary sector) projects to develop non-clinical practices that speak to 'joint action'. This is important in extending my practices outside of the clinic.
The research has highlighted the relevance of local acts of resistance at a practice level that are in relationship with wider (global) discourses of justice doing.	Laura tells me that not only did she benefit from the group but that her daughter did also; that they both grew in confidence. She wrote to the local paper to challenge an article that declared that 'rape was rare' and continues to work towards social justice. She is also working at setting up a peer support group.	I have always told the story that I am not creative; and thought I had better change that. I engaged in creative writing groups, storytelling projects, writing poetry and even had art lessons. I noticed that it influenced my thinking about the inquiry, aesthetically and relationally.	I notice that I am more likely to consider creative means of expression for myself and people coming to talk with me in a therapy and group context. This has surprised and delighted me.

This inquiry has promoted the benefits of practice-based research as a rich opportunity for understanding and developing recursive practices.	Anne tells me that she looks to the future in more positive ways since the group helped her to feel safe and offered her the solidarity that gives her hope for a better future for all women. She is a core member in the setting up peer support services.	I had three papers published during the time of this research and am working on further publications. I notice that this impacts how I view myself as a practitioner and as a person. I feel more confident when I talk with people about what I do.	I notice a stronger leaning towards transparency in my therapy and supervision practice, and in my writing, training and research (as well as in group contexts). I am less inclined to be anxious about that.
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Ifs and buts

If I were to undertake a similar inquiry in the future, I am pretty sure that I would set it up in the same kind of way; by having conversations with people who I consider to be pivotal to the inquiry. As a systemic practitioner, this would likely (in the future) also involve people who have come to therapy or been part of groups I have run. It might also include colleagues and professional allies, as this inquiry did. I feel that added an important additional layer. Having engaged in *this* inquiry I consider it highly likely that I *will* engage in research in the future, and most likely this also will be considered *insider* research. It would (have to) have social justice at its core. This would be the driver for any kind of exploration into my practice, or in a wider context.

I might, in a similar set of circumstances, also take the same five steps of the *responsive, temporally-framed narrative inquiry*, to develop that exploration, but I doubt it. This is not 'how I am' as a group facilitator, a therapist or (I am beginning to notice) as a researcher. I have never fully stuck to a manual, and I have a very low boredom threshold, especially in relation to repetition. I am much more likely to *feel* my way in relationship to who I am talking with, what I

am reading, what I am noticing in myself and others. As such, it is more likely that I will develop something responsive, something in line with what I am engaged in at the time.

As previously noted, this responsiveness is not only personally intuited but cultivated through experience and training. As such, though the title that I have given the process – a ‘responsive, temporally-framed narrative inquiry’ – may not tell people exactly *what* I did (without this thesis as a reference), I think it does tell people about the *ethos* of the inquiry, and the experience of the researcher. It is the *ethos* that I would ‘replicate’ again, and what I might encourage others to follow to be responsive (in an embodied, intuitive way) to conversations they are part of.

In terms of ‘themes’, I think I might *not* engage in a thematic analysis in a future inquiry as I feel that it *might* have been a distraction from the five-step inquiry (and from the core aim to ‘do justice’) taking me too far down a thematic analysis route. However, I did value the structure that it gave to the thesis (lending convenient titles for chapters). I also valued how it framed my thinking, gave me clear concepts to inquire into, potentially *helping* me reconnect with the core aim.

Catherine Kohler Reissman (2008) suggests that the difference between narrative analysis and other thematic analysis (grounded theory, for example) is that a narrative approach does not ‘fracture’ data. I am not sure that I fully agree, but perhaps this is because I did not follow a pure thematic analysis or a pure narrative analysis. However, what was important for me is that whilst there may have been an element of fracturing transcripts by pulling out (essentially selecting in a pretty crude way) particular themes, I did not feel that this split the story from the storytellers. If there *was* a rupture, it felt repairable, through *listening* again and engaging some more. Interestingly (given the emphasis on resistance in the stories I have been listening to), Reissman also (2001) highlights that she began to notice in her own research work that ‘participants’ were often digressing from the questions being asked. She says that she began to

see this as “...*resisting our efforts to fragment their lived experience into thematic (code-able) categories—our attempts to control meaning*” (Reissman, 2001, p.367).

When I read this, I was immediately curious about how this might have showed itself in the conversations I had been having. It makes me wonder about how I *might* have developed this to look for ‘acts of resistance’ *within* our conversations, ways that each person might have resisted the structure placed upon the conversation. Given that the questions I chose were only loose structures, this might not have been so evident, but it might have. This is worthy of further consideration. *Listening* again *might* have brought this to the fore.

The primary aspect that I *would* replicate would be the idea of ‘*talking again*’. In fact, I might extend this further to include multiple conversations across a wider timeframe, with opportunities to ‘keep the conversation going’. For example, I might have ‘talked again’ with all of the women in the inquiry, doing a two-stage inquiry, perhaps revisiting the conversations six months or a year later. I think this would have been interesting, and would relate to the temporal nature of inquiry. I could also then have a baseline for thinking about my own practices and how they have developed, checking in with myself six months or one year on, noticing what is different in my practice, what is in development, what is yet to come.

Stepping back and moving on allows a new and critical viewpoint which is helpful but (as noted previously) I struggle with critiquing my own work as much as I do the work of others. It is not a skill that comes naturally to me. Helpfully, somebody else (recently) did this for me. As aforementioned, Jarl Wahlstrom (2017) has written an interesting paper reviewing recent contributions to the field of qualitative research in mental health (papers that had recently featured in the same journal he was writing for). He wrote of my (2015) contribution, “...*the role and position of Salter in her study is quite complex. She defines her investigation as ‘inside research’, and it appears that this ‘insider’ position takes many forms. First, the women with*

whom she has conducted what she names as 'conversational inquiries' are women she has either co-facilitated groups with or who have attended those groups. In this sense, she is researching her own practice. But then actually not so because her interest is in the activities of these women as members in the community of which she also is a member, and as members with a particular point of view (which she also shares): that of women who have experiences of oppression and abuse, and who have, in spite of that, found their ways of 'going on' in their lives. Third, the paper itself is, at least in my reading, not actually a report on the findings of those 'conversational inquiries' but has perhaps more the character of an essay or even a testimonial on the role and position of the researcher as an insider." (Wahlstrom, 2017, p.104).

I think this is a fair critique, noting both the positive relationship with complexity and the relationship with complexity that may lean more towards confusion. It sounds to me that Jarl Wahlstrom himself is not quite sure how to position himself in relation to what I have called 'research'; he is not *quite* critically suggesting that it might be more of a testimonial than a story of research. I do not think that is unfair, particularly as I was not near finished at that time, and writing more about the process than the outcome of the inquiry. I also do not hear it as *necessarily* a 'bad thing'. It reminds me of Janey's review of my writing which suggests that complexity is to be celebrated even if it (at least temporarily) confuses the reader. This may, in turn, bring its own perturbation into what we take for granted, what we think we know. I accept that this style will not be appreciated by everyone, but if I do not take the risk in *trying* to capture some of that complexity then I do not take up the opportunity to potentially perturb injustice. Accepting that I run the risk of being *criticised* (not just critiqued) for this has been part of my learning.

Adams St Pierre (2002) makes attempts to critique even the *mode* of critiquing, and I respect this immensely. She quotes Foucault (1988) when she says, "*Critique is not a matter of saying*

that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, [on] what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices we accept rest." (Foucault, 1988, p. 154, in Adams St. Pierre, 2002, p. 4).

I can relate to this definition of critique. I have struggled within this process to engage with an invitation (as I see it) to *criticise* the work of others (as well as my own) in order to prove that I have the ability to deconstruct other people's contributions and also as a way to prove that I have something different and unique to say. I do not feel at all comfortable with this, and maybe this *is* my strongest critique; a critique of the way that academia maintains its privileged position through an adversarial approach to relationship. I experience a massive tension in me in continuing on the basis that this is expected of me. I know that I can do it in order to 'do the job', if I choose to, but I also recognise a strong sense of resistance in me suggesting that I do something different, to not just comply and keep the peace; but to fight against the pressure to conform, to engage in an 'act of resistance'.

I am not sure if I *achieved* either the demonstration of an ability to critique *or* a resistance to do it. I think I have fallen between the two. Being transparent (honest) about that may not help at all and I recognise the risk embedded in owning (up to) my failings. Falling between the positions of maintaining the safety and confidentiality of the women in this inquiry and bringing important contextual stories into the public gaze might also speak to failure. If I am honest, I am not sure *how* I would do this differently in the future, but I would certainly give it as much (if not more) thought as I did this time around. It was a very challenging compromise to leave out contextual details which could have been useful for the reader (and the wider academic community) but potentially risky for the women involved. Risk (as it often does) took priority, but I am not altogether satisfied with the outcome. It represents loss, and what might 'get lost' in any such story of 'becoming'.

I was struck when I read Patti Lather's 'Getting lost' by the way she skillfully incorporates critique of her own work, alongside the critical voices of others. One that really stuck with me was a quote by Simon Watney (1994, p.221 in Lather, 2007, p.89). His comment is not directed solely at Lather and Smiley's 'Troubling the angels' but in general at the research/literature surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. He suggests that the social sciences are '*taking the scenic route through an emergency*'. This resonates for me on many levels; not just because I may feel that I am living in privilege whilst other women are living in grave danger. It is also because I feel a sense of time pressing. Maybe not in the same way it would be if I were talking about the current refugee crisis or responding to a medical emergency that may have passed by the time I finish writing, but pressing nonetheless.

The sexual abuse of women and social injustice is not an acute problem in that definition; it is chronic and enduring, has been around for far too long and is not likely to disappear overnight, but I do feel a sense of urgency. I do not *want* to be talking about this in five years' time, though I have little doubt that I will be. I hope though, that others will also be talking about it and take the argument on, expanding the narrative and keeping it contemporary and up-to-date.

Recommendations

I think that, potentially, this research *is* already out of date. Perhaps it was dated before completion, maybe even before it began. As a retrospective inquiry, it is a representation of projects that I was involved in, in a past tense, so maybe that is to be expected. It is also, however, representative of ideas/ thoughts/concepts that have been around in me (or that I have been developing) for many years, and that is also potentially dating. For example, the emphasis on gender does not feel altogether contemporary, even when in connection with very current movements such as the #MeToo campaign. This too (despite being a current campaign for justice) is based on years and years of injustice, so it also (in many ways) already needs to

move on and transform into something different. For example, I would love to see/hear responses to this movement (and my inquiry) from people who do not define themselves or others in either/or gendered language.

I would love to see an inquiry into abuse and oppression that includes the voices of people who define themselves as trans-gender, gender neutral or non-binary. Conversely, I would be interested in understanding more about the nature of abuse and oppression that is experienced by men and/or perpetrated by women. I think this would be interesting and would add to the complexity of these kinds of conversations. I would enjoy reading it and imagine that I would learn from it. I would also be interested to see whether an inquiry such as this, following the #MeToo campaign (perhaps in five years' time) would reflect movement/difference at a cultural level.

In terms of recommendations though, I would suggest that the framework of conversational inquiry and the five-step inquiry I developed, *does* offer scope for practitioners to develop their own repertoire of reflexive practices and explore their practice in unique and sensitive ways, as (hopefully) I have demonstrated. As suggested, if *I* were to involve myself in an inquiry such as this in the future, I *might* replicate the five-step model, or I might develop a different one that is as responsive as it can be to the people and subject I am engaged with/in at that time.

To *extend* this research, I might recommend taking it further by considering more cross-cultural issues; and in particular (if considerations of *current* safety and ethics allowed), a further study of closed communities such as island communities and how the relationship with sexual abuse could prove important research for informing *future* safety.

In terms of *this* inquiry, I have learnt an awful lot about myself (and my practice) throughout, and no doubt beyond. Do I think it is 'enough'? I think not. Patti Lather's voice rings in my ears as I come to the end of this very long journey. I was never going to do 'enough' justice to feel

entirely satisfied. I accepted the inevitability of failure early on, and maybe that was helpful, or maybe that made me too comfortable with the idea of failure; I am not sure. It has been (as I might have anticipated) a complex journey into research that has been as troubling as it has been liberating.

Perhaps the biggest learning point for me is that I started this process feeling that I needed to do 'more' than listen to women who were coming to therapy and 'more' than develop 'local' practices. I had an idea that being involved in inquiry, writing *about* my work and getting that writing into the public domain and reaching a wider audience, might feel that I *was* doing more. What I have learnt is the opposite; that local practices are *vital*. They might connect with wider narratives, a wider academic community, but they need to stay alive and be sustained in the domain of practice. *This* is the 'doing' bit of social justice and resistance. Having immersed myself in reading, writing, thinking about all of this, getting back to 'doing' is perhaps the most liberating aspect; and is a response to the call for urgency that I have been listening to way before I started this inquiry. It may not (ever) be 'enough', but (maybe) it is a 'good enough' reminder, for now.

As a final recommendation, I would suggest that the frame of 'good enough' research is one that others may use as a starting point. Sarah Tracy's (2011) 'eight big tent' criteria for research is also a helpful frame that I would recommend. For me, it offered a robust frame for beginning an inquiry that aimed to be reflexive and socially just. I would recommend this as a sound place from which any research can start, particularly if social justice is at its core.

A summary

The last word...

Throughout this thesis I have presented a story of research, told in three acts, with the addition of a prologue (introduction), an epilogue (an exploration of what it means to 'become' a researcher, and a review of the process) and a final summary that speaks to (and reflects on) the whole story. The acts were presented as 'acts of resistance', connecting the structure of the thesis with the overall methodology/ethos of social justice and with my practices.

The first act tells the story of the significance of group work practice and how that interfaces with conversations about solidarity. The groups I discuss were set up with the intent of challenging oppression and injustice by bringing people together, and bringing previously invisible stories into the light. The groups were wellbeing groups for women in a Welsh valleys community and groups for women who have experienced sexual abuse, in a British island community. Each group was itself an intervention that speaks to resistance.

The second act focuses on the inquiry that followed these interventions and is shaped by conversation or 'talking again'. I highlighted how I went through the process of talking with women who had been part of these groups that I had previously co-facilitated. This was a further intervention (and act of resistance) and the focal point of the inquiry.

I described the theory behind (and influences on) the choices I made in terms of methodology and I described how I set up the conversations, who I was speaking with, the four questions that helped give some shape to the conversations, and some of the dialogue that ensued. I was also making connections between previous and current practices, drawing on my own personal stories and how they have shaped how I practice. I then explained how I immersed myself in the words that were spoken in these conversations, developing a five-step process of inquiry that I

hoped would 'do (enough) justice' to the voices of those who had consented to talk with me, and who had/have such important stories to share. Some of the content of those conversations were presented and connections were made between theory and practice and between the personal and the political aspects of the inquiry.

The themes that emerged from these conversations were presented in Act Three and proved to be helpful springboards for inquiring into different stories of resistance and solidarity. The themes were *deconstructing roles and rules, going on from legacies of abuse, co-constructing preferred futures, doing solidarity, challenging them and us thinking, unpacking power, doing social justice, and doing research as (an act of) resistance*. The last theme was expanded on in the epilogue as a way to pay attention to my own story of transformation, of 'becoming' a (reflexive) researcher.

The themes were presented as individual chapters drawing on material from the conversations, but also making explicit connections between theory and practice, and between conversation as inquiry and writing as inquiry, demonstrating how the ideas are in *flow* throughout the process of writing. The themes (chapters) are very much in relationship with each other, so whilst they may be presented separately, they form a collective, much like the stories of women through the inquiry. Movement was highlighted. I was moving between past and present practices and also current cultural and political contexts which were influencing my thinking and connecting with social justice.

In the epilogue, I sought to demonstrate how my ideas developed through the period from 2013 to 2017 when I was 'living' in this inquiry; a story of 'becoming a researcher' and engaging in resistance. Movement again is a key feature. I also paid attention to the *discomfort* that accompanied this movement, offering an insider critique to the power embedded in the 'doing' of inquiry, entering into the world of 'research'.

In presenting (and sharing) all of this, I believe that I was/am paying attention to my initial aim for the project which was to relationally connect research and practice in a way that speaks to resistance and contributes to a wider discourse of social justice. The *outcomes* of this are still in development, showing themselves in my current practices and in me confirming my responsibility to reflexivity. However, I feel that I have been able to name and demonstrate some contributions as highlighted in the previous table (in the review). These are principally connected to the original research question, confirming for me that inquiring into collective narratives (and narrative group work practices) has indeed informed my ongoing practice. It has helped me to see (and embody) research as social action; and has kept me in relationship with my own personal, ethical and social responsibility as a systemic practitioner. Beyond that, it has also offered a contribution to the wider systemic community by suggesting ways that we can collectively *challenge* oppressive practices by practicing in *anti*-oppressive ways as therapists, supervisors, trainers, group facilitators, community activists, researchers, as *people* engaged in creating 'better social worlds'.

As such, I have provided an argument for talking (again) *with* women who have experienced abuse and oppression as a means to continue a story of transformation (for the individual) *and* contribute to a collective story of transformation as a means to challenge social injustice and inequality.

I have also put forward a case for de-individualising trauma and abuse (the medicalising of 'symptoms' associated with experience), and instead offer an argument for group work that can contribute to more meaningful stories of resistance and solidarity. The premise here is that 'witness' practices can contribute positively to the ongoing dialogue that is qualitative research, and to systemic practices, 'on the ground'.

In addition, I have provided an argument for the benefits of engaging in systemic research as a means to *develop* practice. Reflexive, practice-based research offers the ideal platform for such a rich learning opportunity that is mutually beneficial for the practitioner, the practice community and for the communities in which we practice.

Even more importantly, for me, I have been able to engage in a meaningful way with (to honour) the stories that women have shared with me, and the stories that shape who I am and how I practice. This, was an extraordinary privilege, and I end with my genuine thanks to all those involved.

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Appendices

- 1- Example of a letter to 'contributors' (posted or hand delivered)
- 2- Example of a consent form (individually signed by all contributors)
- 3- Example of a transcript (Janey and Lucy)
- 4- Example of the five-step inquiry into the transcript (Janey and Lucy)
- 5- Ethics proposal
- 6- Excerpt from Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice Handbook, thesis criteria

Appendix 1

Dear

My name is Leah Salter. I am a UKCP registered Family and Systemic Psychotherapist and a Doctoral student at The University of Bedfordshire, on the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice Course. You may remember me from when we were in a group together, that I co-facilitated in Caerphilly. As part of my doctoral studies, I am currently conducting an inquiry about groups for women, focusing on groups that I have previously been part of/co-facilitated.

I would like to invite you to be part of this inquiry by talking with me about your experience of the group you attended. This will take the shape of a (maximum) one and a half hour conversation with you and I, and the other women who attended the group with you. The complete content of our conversations will only be reviewed by me and the supervisors of the research. I will listen to our conversations, write down what has been said, and then look at themes that have been talked about. The recording will then be destroyed after March 2017. The recording and transcript of what has been said will be kept in a locked cabinet. Some of the content of what was said will be included in the write-up of my research, which may include some quotes from you. These will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified by people reading the research. Others in the group (who you already know from the group you were part of) will hear what you say, and because of that, we cannot promise that what you say will remain completely private, but we will ask that you and all other group members to respect the privacy of everyone in the group, as we did originally. The group will be at a location where you are comfortable, probably where the group was where we first met.

Taking part in the inquiry is your decision. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. You may also stop talking at any time or decide not to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering. The group will give you and others opportunity to talk and share your experience of being part of the group you were part of. There will be some informal questions in a conversational style and art materials will be available if you should want to contribute through drawing or writing. With your consent I would like to take some photos of the work produced. No identifying photos (of people) will be taken. Participation, non-participation or withdrawal will not affect your relationship to the organisation that set up the group in any way. If you take part in the conversation but then at a later date decide that you do not want your story/words to be included in what I write then you can withdraw at any point between the date of the conversation and before the end of October 2015 when I will begin writing up the research. I am more than happy to answer any questions you have about taking part or not, or about the nature of the research. You may contact me at leah.salter@study.beds.ac.uk. You can also contact my director of studies at gail.simon@beds.ac.uk. Many thanks for taking the time to read this letter. If you decide to talk with me and take part in this research, you will be required to fill in the attached agreement form which confirms that you are happy, at least at this stage, to take part. If you need any help in filling that out or require further information to help you decide, then do let me know. I look forward to meeting with you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Leah Salter (Family and Systemic Psychotherapist and Doctoral student)

Appendix 2

Consent for participation in research

Conversational Inquiry (island practice base)

Researcher – Leah Salter, student of The University of Bedfordshire, Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice Programme

RESEARCH TITLE: *Acts of resistance: A reflexive inquiry into narrative group work with women who have experienced abuse and oppression.*

I have been given information about this research and discussed the research project with Leah Salter who is conducting this research as part of her Professional Doctorate supervised by Dr. Gail Simon from The University of Bedfordshire.

I have been advised of the nature of this research, which includes issues of confidentiality, how my information will be stored and how my anonymity will be protected. I have had an opportunity to ask Leah any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research after the dialogue, up to October 2015. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my treatment in any way or my relationship with (the health service) or my relationship with the University of Bedfordshire.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Leah Salter and if I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact Gail Simon (Leah's director of studies).

By signing below I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

- ☐ Be part of a focus group which will include women I was previously in a group with
- ☐ Being audio recorded in the group
- ☐ Include what I say in the group in the research which will be written up for publication
- ☐ I understand that my name will not be used and no identifying information will be used
- ☐ I consent for art work that I may produce in the focus group to be used in the research
- ☐ I consent for photos to be taken but that these will not include photos of my face
- ☐ I consent for my details to be stored during the length of the project and to be destroyed afterwards

- ☐ I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for this research only (including publication) and will be destroyed after the research has completed.

- ☐ I would like to have a copy of the research when it is written.

Signed _____

Date _____

Appendix 3

Interview 2

Leah So if you think back to those early days, when we were in the shaping stage, how did you feel about it; what sense did you get about what we were part of making/co-creating?

Lucy It's hard to go back now and think, isn't it? Cos personally, I think I have developed as a practitioner since then so I think what we were developing at the time has very much changed now... back then I think, you know ... it was about working as a team with other women to think about how we can support women with similar experiences but... not just us as professionals supporting clients, but how they can the support each other...

Leah So even in those early phases, in those early conversations, I think we were already thinking about life after the group, and the seed had already been sown by the work that you were part of, Janey

Janey Yes, but that's going back a long time now. I'm trying to think, it's maybe about 10 years, something like that and it was part of the plan we put... I remember putting it together with (our colleague), putting it to a committee of board members and it had to go quite high to agree to do it. We had to put forward a case, and part of the case was that we hoped right from the start that it would evolve into a more service user lead, and provide, mmm, a support in the community that was, in our eyes, not already there... That we hoped would develop... I have to say that aspect wasn't really there at that time... but it was definitely part of our vision.

Leah I'm interested... even if it is going off the subject a little bit. I think it is part of the overall thing... how come... how come... it had to go so high in order to get that initial permission.

Janey Do you know what? I think... there was a sense that... This is a risky thing to do, that you are meddling with people that might have... quite profound... might be quite profoundly affected by their experiences and... it needs to be safe... and we need to be convinced that you are... that it's in good hands... that you know what you are doing and you will manage it safely so that it doesn't actually make people worse... I think that was a kind of flavour of people higher up than us, so we had to convenience them to the contrary.

Leah Yeah, there was also, cos I think we encountered... something similar... some... maybe reticence is too strong... but there was definitely some worry and anxiety about it ... and that was re-establishing itself when we came along.

Lucy Yeah, and you could see that in the sort of referrals... in that the... referrals we started with were kind of people on our caseloads... even then, you know, we had to go on and do a lot of education to people from the first group, saying this was how it worked and this was the experiences of women who came along to it... then we started to get a few more referrals, but I do think people thought, you know... that we were opening a can of worms... and it might make people's emotional wellbeing worse... you know...

Leah Do you think? Do you think that was like a multi-layered thing cos I... looking back on it... I wonder whether it wasn't just that you are opening a can of worms for that one individual (and that we need to check that that individual is safe) but I wonder also if... (and for you looking

back even before that, Janey) whether there was a sense... that we might be uncovering something that would be better off covering up.

Janey (emphatically) Yes... I was thinking that just now really. I was thinking that if you look at the evidence base in terms of how many people are likely to have experienced sexual abuse who also experience mental health issues in adulthood, it's, umm, quite shocking the absence of service for those group of people, and you wonder if the service is actually reflecting society's wish.

Janey Particularly in a small community that there is... I feel as an outsider (and Lucy may have a different perspective as an insider) to (the island). I feel as if there is ... mmm ... a strong 'group think' in (the island), that we are 'lucky to live here'.

Janey And that this is a good place to live. We are luckier than people who have to live somewhere else, and that not much bad stuff happens here compared with what happens if you live somewhere else, and to actually... then be exposed to the fact that bad things are happening to people (quite a lot) in this community is hard because it goes against the 'group think'.

Lucy But I agree to that as well.

Janey Do you?

Lucy Cos I think even if you ... even my experiences of when I went to university... and you would tell people you were from (the island), eh? They would say 'oh, you must be rich'. Or 'oh, it's lovely over there, how lucky you are to live there"...mmm... and actually... the kind of reality is that horrible things still happen in a small community... it's just that it's not known, it's not talked about and until I started my nurse training I didn't know... you know... kind of... how much poverty there was... how mmm... that there were these bad things that were happening to people... all that... I mean you probably know it's going on, you know, but you... cos it's not right in front of your face... you don't have to think about it.

Leah So even, even in that early phase then... this idea of what are we, what are we making together?... We weren't just making a group, we were making a statement.

Lucy Yeah.

Leah You know, creating the group was an intervention... into... kind of... society, if you like. That actually, we recognise that this is a problem.

Lucy Yeah, yeah, and I think... looking back... I think that was important cos I think for me that was, you know, it makes me angry (emphasised) that people don't know that these things happen... and it was like... you know... if we can support... you know. People to... kind of move forward from their experiences and kind of develop within themselves then maybe they can get to a point where they feel strong enough... to kind of... stand up to the higher powers and actually get out there and say, you know...

Leah So it's a bit of modelling, like Janey having to go to the 'board' and having to kind of stand there and prove ourselves; it's that... that... that bit of having to show that we are

prepared to take some risks and that we... you know... we have to be part of... be part of that challenge... I think sort of challenge to the status quo...

Janey Yeah, and I might just clarify I use the term 'board' but I shouldn't have done... I think the correct term would be service provision group... but it had politicians on it, which is why I remember 'that'... but it also had psychiatrists, senior nurses... just sort of... but it doesn't exist anymore.

Leah Right, so it was kind of part clinical, part political.

Janey Yes.

Leah See, I find that interesting cos in a way I think that's what we are saying this group was. Kind of part clinical, part political.

Janey Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Lucy And that's what it's gone on to be hasn't it? It's still supporting one another and supporting others but also... it's about ... thinking about... political... you know, things that come up... and being able to ... have a voice for a group of people who share similar experiences... so, for example, when there were comments in the paper that "'ape isn't common in (the island)' then having a group of women who can stand up and say 'well, actually, no it is very common', and kind of put that to rights.

Janey Yes, they're thinking of stranger rapes often, aren't they?

Leah Yeah... and yes, I should have said in the beginning, don't worry if you use names... that will get edited out... how I am writing it at the moment... I am not even naming the community so we are not risking the confidentiality of the client group. Trying to shine a light on social injustices using an island community as an example but without doing so in such a way that it is unfair to those people who are raising these issues... it's making me think of conversations... Lucy and I met with the original group just last night... thinking about how they have sort of moved forward... and we were talking about the use of language... and we were having a bit of ... bit of a debate... (involving someone from a charity group who came to meet with us) one person (from that group) was saying how she hates this sort of political language and... why don't you just call us patients cos that's what we are... so we were having this sort of debate... and one of the ladies (from the group) said 'well, it doesn't really matter to me, the use of language'... and we were saying that how... that if it's your experience, that's fine... you can own that... so if you want to say, you know as an individual, you know, 'I'm a victim' as an individual then that's your right to say that but... as 'professionals'... I have been using the language of Vikki Reynolds (someone who works with communities in a social justice frame) and she uses the language of 'imperfect allies'... so you know... we haven't had the some experiences so we can't own the language in the same way... so we have to be more cautious of our language because we are attributing it to someone else.

Janey Yes.

Leah Which might feel quite objectifying... and it was just reminding me... how... we did a lot of that... in the initial stages with the group, thinking about language, so even though we might have over-egged it, because they weren't so worried about some of the language... it was really

important to us that we were sort of... clear about... when we use language like 'victim or survivor' that they were comfortable with any of...

Janey And (emphatically) that they knew what you meant.

Leah Absolutely, yeah, yeah... it just becomes so generic.

Janey We just assume we know what 'survivor' means (for example).

Leah Yeah, absolutely.

Lucy But having said that, if you think about the second group... I agree... in the first group, I think we were more careful than in the second group... although we did say that (every now and then), does that feel okay to people? Does that, are you all right with me using that kind of work... or... that... but yeah, the first group, if we kind of look back, we did a lot more around language and... looking at stereotypes and things like that didn't we, eh?

Leah I think that... maybe... the first group felt a much more politically motivated group

Lucy Yeah, and much more reflective, I think...

Leah From a very early stage... they had that sort of 'edge' to them, almost straight away they were saying 'so what are we going to do about this?', you know... whereas, I think the second group were more 'what are you going to do about this, to help me?'.

It just had that kind of feel to it... whereas, now... I think the two groups are on a similar kind of playing field... they're both thinking... 'so now that we've got this kind of collective identity... what are we going to do... with this?'.

Janey But I was just thinking, while you were talking, that you were identifying differences between two different groups, but I was also thinking back on mmm... things changing even within the same group over times... and mmm... because of the sort of slightly anxiety provoking start we have... cos lots of people were saying 'you sure you know what you're doing?', you know and 'what sort of frame are you going to use?'... and CBT (cognitive behaviour therapy) was just, mmm, just coming out as being the panacea of all and... the fact that we weren't intending to have structure, where week one you'd be talking about this and week two you'd talk about this, and week three you'd talk about that, but rather that we would try very hard to be group led and allow... allow them to decide what they talked about and what they didn't talk about ...mmm... was... not very fashionable.

Janey And so there were some raised eyebrows about that, so because of that... I think... we started off... maybe... with the voices of ... warning voices in our head saying things like 'don't forget about boundaries' and you know... those sort of adult mental health type worries... and so... perhaps when we started we were more mindful of being 'professional' women... rather than the group... different to... obviously with a different job to do... you know, partly containment... partly facilitation... etc. ... but as the group went on over the weeks, I think there was more of a sense that we were freed up to be ourselves... mmm... a bit more... and to be 'fellow women'. I was thinking of that phrase you just used – what was it? – 'imperfect allies' or something... mmm... and ... mmm... I suppose as we all got to know each other... there

became more trust in the group... we were all freed up a bit and that included 'us', not just 'them'.

Lucy Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, I agree, cos I think ... I think that the fact that people had worried about what the group might evoke in people probably played at the back of our minds so that when we went in, we were like... you know... be a bit careful... and I think more so for me with my lack of experience with working with a group of women with those experiences, but yeah, I think like us at the end of the group with the women compared to the beginning... so I think it was... kind of small examples that we talked about in supervision... like at the end of the group the women were helping themselves to tea and coffee and asking us if we wanted one so... so it became less of 'us and them' and more of us all being a group of women... and mmm... and even other things like, you know, if one of the women brought something to the group, they would look at us and we would say... you know... what are your thoughts? And then... and then... they would say 'what do you think?' (at the end). I like that way.

Janey So do I.

Lucy Cos I think it's nice to have a bit of structure ... but it was also nice to know that it was a bit free and that you didn't have to stick solely to that because ... because then it feels a bit too clinical... a bit too forced, you know. As human beings we go with what we get ,don't we?

Janey Yes, and sometimes you never know when somebody's going to have a moment of new insight and it would be a shame for us to close that down because it doesn't fit with the objectives of the meeting... or session.. so you can just go with the flow, can't you?

Lucy Yeah, and we had an example of that... in the first group... there was (one client) who had enduring mental health/illness and she was talking with the rest of the group... and the group were talking about their experiences and how they would deal with their kind of day-to-day stuff now and then, you know, and everyone was going 'oh gosh, yeah I do that', you know, or 'yeah, I find that difficult' or ... and this lady said 'I always thought that was part of my mental health'.

Leah I think it was about hyper vigilance... and the story she had always told herself was that this was paranoia.

Lucy Paranoia, yeah.

Leah Which would fit with her diagnosis, in terms of what she's been told ... so, as she was talking about it, she was saying 'you know, I'm really worried about it sometimes. I think someone's behind me 'or something like that... I can't remember exactly... but it was kinda like that...

Janey Of course, that fits.

Leah And other people were saying 'yeah, I get that'... and as you say, there was real moment of...

Lucy And for her, it was that moment of, you know... gosh this...

Leah It's not a symptom.

Lucy It's not a symptom.

Janey It's normalising it in that context... which is likely to be helpful to her and the way she sees herself.

Lucy Yeah.. and again then again in the second group... there were snippets of that for everyone in the group but for one... like you say... you don't want to shut that down... you want to foster it... and learn from it... really kind of... yeah... pay it attention for what it is.

Janey Absolutely... just going back to this idea of being 'other than'. You know, I don't think we ever really got there... and, you know, it was summed up for me in a very sort of vivid pictorial way by the women in the first group we worked with because they observed that... I... that I wore skirts... and so did the other co-facilitator... and they said 'of course, we could never be the same as you cos none of us could ever wear a skirt'.

Leah Wow.

Janey And... there it was... looking round the room... and it was skirt... trousers, trousers, trousers, skirt, trousers, trousers, trousers, and it was true and I had never noticed it before... and they said 'you're lucky that you feel able to wear a skirt. We would never do that'. I mean, another group may have had women in it wearing skirts, you know, but...

Lucy That's really interesting.

Janey They saw it as a sort of demarcation.

Leah Yes, yes. Yeah, really interesting, and I think we've had subtle moments. I mean, that's a beautiful example, isn't it, but we have had similar things like that... small things that people were noticing about differences in some shape or form... I can't remember anything specific... yes, I do remember, so there was ... we did an exercise around how do we nurture ourselves... what sorts of things do we do that are nurturing, ways to look after ourselves and what kinds of things do we do on a daily basis that are nurturing or depleting of our energy? Because the second group liked some sort of structure ... so anyway, we did this exercise... and we came up with 'bath', and we were the only two who said that we enjoy bathing... that we enjoy it for relaxing, it's nurturing... it's lovely to lie in a bath... And everyone else was horrified... so you would have to get undressed... there's a mirror in the bathroom... how terrifying that is... how terrifying it is to lie naked in the bath, prone, how that would be just not enjoyable ... and even showers ... you know, they said 'I'm in, I'm out, this is just to get clean'.

Lucy And massages and things, you know, it came out about massages and facials and things and they were like 'I couldn't let anyone touch me'.

Leah Yeah, and that was a... that was a real stark difference between Lucy and I saying 'oh, yeah, I love a massage', 'I love a bath', and them.

Lucy But I don't think any of them... like, I never thought of that at the time but now I can... see... but one of the group seemed to...

Leah They didn't name it.

Lucy They didn't name it as a difference, but they could see.

Leah But there were some subtle things where you could see that they were looking at each other at that point so rather than... you know, one of the ladies, if someone said something that didn't fit for her she would look at us... and I noticed in that session... she was ... what she did was look at the others... she did that look like *they're* a bit odd and *we're* alike, we're sort of, on this side and they are on that side... just in the eye contact... but I was very aware of that at the time.. if we had thought about it at the time... we might have chosen to say one of us doesn't, one of us doesn't (like baths), to show that it's okay to have difference. I mean, it was fine how it worked out but... there again in the first group I think more of the women in that group would have been able to say that they actually enjoy looking after themselves: 'I enjoy going to the hairdresser etc. I might not look at myself in the mirror but I can do this. I can play the game'.

Lucy And that's cos of where they were at on their journey. The other group were that little bit further along in terms of self, self-blame and responsibility. The first group were almost, they were aware that it kind of ... the perpetrator played their responsibility.

Janey Yeah, as you said earlier, they were a bit more politically, well, thinking a bit more politically.

Leah Yes, so whilst they might still have that thought of 'I feel disgusting when I look in the mirror or when I bathe', they had got to the point where it was kinda like 'screw you'... and were able to sort of override it, whereas women in the second group were much more still not sure... they didn't know whether they had the right to say 'screw you'.

Janey Or the right to be kind to themselves.

Leah So it's a kind of longer process then, in that sense.

Lucy But you could feel that in the room though, couldn't you, really? If I reflect back now that kind of sense... for some people more... that sense of... you could almost feel that's what they believe about themselves... one of the ladies there was a massive sense of 'I'm a bad person' and you could feel that in the room and that was even when we tried to do the things that are kind of about how we see ourselves... and we put pictures down... about how we see ourselves... and that lady couldn't do it..she found that very overwhelming... like, 'if I put pictures down of me, then you will see how horrible I am'... and that was quite 'wow' that someone could feel that way about themselves ...

Leah And the other women were really shocked by that, yeah...

Lucy But it brought up a good discussion where we... some of the other women kind of challenged her a bit and said 'but why does everyone deserve to... and you don't' and actually, she sat there and thought about it.

Janey I was, umm, just thinking about your original question about moving on and what happens post the group and... I don't know what it said about us as facilitators but what happened every time we ran that group and I think we did three, maybe four... was that, as it neared the end which was 12, 12 group meetings, the group would ask if it could be extended.

Lucy (laughs)

Janey And they said that they just felt like it had just got started, and established a really good therapeutic environment and they trusted everyone, they trusted each other and they hadn't finished what they had set out to achieve with us still being there and they weren't ready... to do it by themselves and the first time that happened, we were persuaded listening to the service user voice and being responsive that, you know, not to end it... and then the next three times we made it much clearer right from the start that we... that that would be it... and every time we met we would say, 'now this is number 6 of 12', 'this is number 7 of 12', you know... mmm... in a bit more of a psycho-dynamic kind of way... preparing them for the ending mmm... either way... by the point at which we finished... even if we extended it to 18 weeks which we did once, they still didn't feel ready (laughs) and they still didn't want to stop. Mmm, and we... a couple of the strongest characters used to meet for a coffee after the group had finished and ... but... it didn't really happen... and you know... looking back on it, it was a ... well, was it a shame? Well, I do wonder if there was anything we could have done better... or differently... that would have helped them to feel as if we were letting them feel important.

Leah Yeah, yeah, that sounds very familiar.

Lucy Yeah, yeah.

Leah (laughs) Well, we're still meeting with the first group AND the second group, whilst (laughs) whilst we're preparing for the third group.

Janey (laughs).... So, you're...

Lucy The third group is kind of on hold, isn't it, until there is somewhere where all groups can go to.

Janey Has the first group met with the second group yet?

Leah Yes.

Janey Oh, that's good, cos we hadn't got that far.

Lucy Yeah, so they've met.

Leah Yeah, that's happened.

Lucy Twice, and actually someone from the first group joined us for a couple of sessions in the second group.

Janey Yes, we did that as well.

Lucy So we had this co-facilitator kind of idea where they would...

Leah Which worked really well, actually.

Lucy But no, definitely, there was kind of a sense... but also with the first group though... cos with the second group, although they were ready to start their own group... they weren't ready to end... and they spoke about how much they would miss that group and miss meeting as a group of women like that ... mmm... the second group, they didn't ask for many more sessions, did they, and when we asked if they... you know, 'what do you think it is that we haven't covered

that would be helpful to help you to move on'... it only came up as one session's kind of worth..... whereas the first group...

Leah But we had the first group for them to kinda.... That we were able to say 'come along to some more sessions'... or 'you can meet with the old group'... and they were actually more drawn to meet with them than to do more sessions with us.

Janey Ah, that's good.

Leah So that worked well.

Lucy Yeah.

Leah But yeah, I think it says a lot about the nature of the group... and I think it says a lot about how we respond to those sorts of experiences ... and I mean... I can own that it says a lot about me as a practitioner... I mean... I do find it hard to say goodbye to people... when you... you know... I find it very easy to say goodbye when people say 'thank you very much', that's fine (laughter) but when someone is saying 'actually, I'm still struggling', I think it's quite hard to just sort of say "okay, but we need to end now". I mean, just in terms of finishing on time, we were absolutely appalling at that.

Janey Ah well, you see, we weren't, but then my co-facilitator was a psychodynamic counsellor.

Leah Ah, so that helped.

Janey Yes, she used to say, sort of 10 minutes before the end, 'there's 10 minutes left'.

Lucy And we weren't very good at finishing, were we? But there's something there about beliefs. I think I... I didn't want to say 'we've got 10 minutes left' for fear of being rude or of cutting something off that's actually quite... and I'm probably sure vice versa.

Leah Mmm, but also it speaks to that positioning within the group though, because it says something about... which links to... what was it (the group) doing within us? And us within it, that sort of recursive relationship between the life of the group and our own sense of our practice and I think, for me, it is that you start in a more facilitative position and people are looking to you for the structure ... whereas, I think, as time went on and we were part OF the group, ONE of, then it's more difficult to say 'right, we need to finish now' because you're in that position of...

Lucy yeah yeah

Leah 'So who says my time is more valuable than your time?' and then there's all of those kind of power dynamics that it raises...which in therapy it's much more straightforward cos people know they're coming for an hour for therapy ... you are their therapist... you know, even if you have a close working relationship you're still defined by therapist and person coming to therapy, whereas I think in these kind of groups, it's less defined by facilitator and person attending.

Janey Yes, but for us there were logistical considerations as well, cos our groups decided that they wanted to meet in the day... and avoid school holidays... most of them were mothers of school-aged children... so they could ... you know... come when their children were in school

and then go to pick them up again so there was always the thing about 'when was your next appointment?'... as busy people, it's hard to leave it open-ended at the middle of the day.

Lucy Whereas at the end of the day, it's only your time.

Janey And it's your choice whether to eat in to it, isn't it?

Leah And that was reflected even so much as there was one lady whose partner used to take her there and come pick her up... and I would ask... 'do you need to go?' and it was like 'he'll wait' and there was this sense that this was more important than other aspects of her life... and I think we were probably guilty of doing that as well... so... rather than thinking 'now it's our time'... it was like 'this feels more important than us having time out' and I think, you know, as the group went on the investment IN the group was reflected in that... you know, that idea of boundaries (laughs) comes in o question... cos there was more a sense of, I suppose, shared ownership of the group. I became much more aware of what a privilege it was to be part of this group, rather than 'I'm out of work time and I need to clock off'.

Janey Yes, and I think that word, you know, cos sometimes it can be bandied about in a PR stroke sort of cheesy kind of way but actually, I know exactly what you mean and I know you mean it cos so do I cos it is a privilege, isn't it?

Lucy And I think it IS especially when women.. well, not just women, when people have those experiences cos you know how much it's taken for them to 'out' themselves just by being in a group like that.

Leah Absolutely.

Lucy If they are going to out themselves or invest in this experience, then you kind of feel that they're ... there's like a level of respect you have for them.

Janey It's a brave thing to do.

Lucy Yeah, it's a brave things to do, and...

Janey Sharing things about you that you feel most ashamed about.

Lucy Yeah, and actually, hey, are willing to do that with, yes, other women who have shared experiences but also people they don't know ... they don't know if we have those experiences so they can just... but they might assume that we haven't ... and so I think... cos there is a thing... where people might say 'well, you don't understand this', so actually for them to be there and invest in ... in the group from the start... Then I agree... you do feel privileged that you have been part of that journey, especially when you see the women at day one when they come to just meet us first and to prepare for the group... through to the last session when we're having a bit of a party... and that's what I can't get over... the change in the... and I feel proud to have bene part of... to have SEEN that change in them.

Janey I just so vividly remember things that people said 10 years ago having spent the rest of my working life listening to people saying things, it shows the impact of, you know... of what people do and say in those groups ... that I can still remember so well... you know, the people... their stories.

Lucy And it's like when, in one of the groups, cos I've done a few groups in my training and when being qualified, and it's one of the groups I look forward to... it's one of the groups that I never worry about doing... I never think 'oh gosh, I've got to do this group'... I look forward to it... and I don't mind that it's at the end of the day and I don't mind, you know... it's actually nice setting time aside in your day to do bits... do you know what I mean?

Leah And yet, it's probably one of the most emotionally challenging groups and I wonder whether that's their experience group also that they look forward to the group (cos people say 'I look forward to this group') but they also sometimes get upset and, you know, they're working through some very difficult things but also sort of looking forward to it and I think it's a similar experience certainly for me. I know I enjoy the group (coughs). I know I enjoy facilitating it but on Thursday evening I'd go home and I'd be like 'that's me done, 'I just need time out now' because it really, because of that, I think because of the emotional and the political edges. It's not just that you're dealing with people's emotions cos obviously we all do that every day, but it's also treading that political line is exhausting, I think.. because all the time you're thinking 'what can I do about this?'; it's not just 'how do I hear this or hold this?', it's (louder) 'what am I going to do about this? How am I going to be part of this change for something else?'. For me, it triggers this... I can't spend the next 20 years of my working life listening to these stories without doing something about it and that is the bit that's challenging.

Lucy And then what comes up for me is then sitting there and going through that and feeling the anger and stuff but then having to contain that... and so, again, it comes back to boundaries cos, you know, sometimes I've found myself saying 'oh gosh, Lucy, pull it back in a bit', particularly in (this) group because of how the group changes cos you're alongside people you know... at moments I find myself forgetting what my role is... then I think, 'right'...

Leah Yeah, definitely.

Lucy Cos when you're in a session, you're aware of things you are saying and there's certain things that are appropriate or not, but I think that in that group... I must admit... it's hard work to keep on top of that.

Leah Yeah, definitely. Yeah, I agree with that.

Janey And it's a bit like, using a photographic analogy; you sort of zoom in to be with everything and then you suddenly remember 'okay, what's happening?', 'what other process are going on?', 'what do I need to do to make sure this is helpful?'... and then you get drawn back in with your empathy.

Lucy And when you're drawn in, it's almost like (pauses) like you're having a conversation with a friend And it's okay to be (blah, blah, blah) and so I've found that quite challenging in the group.

Janey How much to be you, and how much to be a professional woman?

Lucy Yeah, and how, cos you get invested in... and I like that analogy with the camera... you can kinda zoom in and get 'in it' and then, the moment you pull out, it's like...

Janey Ooh yeah, 'different lens – quick, quick'.

Leah So how does that fit? Cos one of the questions I had in mind was 'what were we becoming?' at that time. I suppose it's quite existential ideas about becoming... but what we were throughout that process... how was that impacting on ourselves and our ideas about our practice? Cos that, I think, is really interesting... that we're noticing these things about ourselves... and I might be wrong... but, for me, it doesn't sound like it's just something that happened in the moment. It was something that happened and changed over time, like you said, Lucy, 'gosh, it's hard to look back cos I feel I've changed so much since then' ... So what was that about, do you think? What was 'going on' at the time for us?

Lucy Quite layered I think, eh?

Janey For me, I've often wondered ... umm... especially coming from a nursing background... you know, most adult mental health nurses would have worked in inpatient settings so you... you are working with people who are really, really really unwell, umm, and I've often thought that we collectively develop a defence mechanism to help us work in this way where we do regard ourselves as being 'other', 'well', 'competent', that this kind of thing wouldn't happen to us, that this is the kind of thing that happens to others... this kind of distress... these kind of cognitive difficulties... these kind of behavioural issues... they happen to 'other' people who are different to us, and that is kind of a way of preserving a sense of ... or reducing the sense of threat that you could get from being exposed to such high levels of distress... by thinking... 'well, that couldn't happen to me'... and, for me, it was part of a wider journey of considering myself as part of a human race rather than, umm, a 'nurse'. I am a human being, the same as these other human beings, and we're all in it together and, you know, we could all be distressed, we could all have difficulties at some point, so it required a dismantling of the defence mechanisms that have been put up there for a reason and, yet for me... it felt better. It felt like a better place to be... from that shift to 'I am a human being, the same as everyone else'.

Lucy And I think I would agree with that in the sense that the reason why people are in the group, not because of some sort of chemical imbalance in their body or brain; it's that people have been, you know... abused at the hands of others... and that can happen to any one of us, can't it?

Leah Yeah, and I wonder if that's the bit that connects with what you said, Lucy, about it's hard to kinda gauge as to how much I'm being a friend or being a professional ... (I'm not sure if that's quite how you put it) but, you know, collectively we are a group of women, and whether or not we've had those particular experiences, I would imagine as women we have all had some experience of feeling either threatened or at risk or oppressed or a sense of injustice, so that you can connect in some way, shape or form with the stories that the women are talking about ... and that automatically, I think, breaks down that barrier because, you know, if I talk to someone who has experienced low levels of anxiety I can, you know, I can completely get that but if I'm talking with someone who's had experiences of psychosis I don't know what that's like ... I can imagine... but I don't know... whereas, when we're talking with women from this group there are some things where I might think 'I can't imagine that' or 'I don't even want to try and imagine that', but there are other times when I think 'yeah, I totally get that'... that, for me, that's the bit that pulls... makes me want to say 'yeah, that sucks', 'that is absolutely shockingly wrong' and 'what are we going to do about it?' and that's the bit that makes me think that the group is enjoyable and challenging and tiring and ... cos it's almost like you're working those edges of your own experience as well as other people's experiences.

Janey I wonder if we would be talking in the same way if we worked with a group of men? Cos I wonder whether ... cos we've talked a lot about being women all together and then moved on to talk about being human beings all together and I just wondered whether... whether it would work or not in the same way and I don't know cos I've never tried it.

Lucy No, and we've spoken about that, haven't we?... and at the end of the first group... they spoke about a group for men.. and they were very clear that it's probably worth having a separate group for women and men (inaudible)... but, for the women, it was more about protecting the men cos they were saying that they felt that men who had had those experiences wouldn't be able to sit in a group with women and talk about a time in their life where they were vulnerable and taken advantage of ... for a group of women... they felt it's more kinda acceptable to say.... So they were kind of saying it needs to be for men and women ... but I wonder what it would be like talking to a group of men.

Leah I think we would definitely be having different kind of conversations.

Lucy It would shift because of their gender, eh? Cos it'd be harder to relate to a male cos I'm a woman, eh?

Janey If you think about Leah's points that she just talked about in terms of unfairness, injustice, oppression (I can't remember the words you use), but it would still be...

Lucy Yeah, you could still relate to that... but I wonder if part of the challenge that.... for the men in the group they would have to get over the barrier.... that it'd be two women... or a woman and a man... facilitator, eh? Though there would be similarities.

Leah I think there would be themes.

Lucy Themes, yeah.

Leah But for me, I think, it would feel different. There would be a different connection cos I think part of the connections is that we're all... all women who all have some sort of generic societal experience of injustice or....whatever that might be... ummm.... That's different to... umm. Umm. Cos, yes, some of the people in that group have had specific experiences of trauma and abuse ... whereas we would all have shared experience.

Leah Absolutely. That kind of stuff is not talked about but is absolutely out there... The more sort of general experience of injustice... and... and the kind of historical power imbalances that have been part of that ... that story of why certain... certain stories have been generated... and I suppose that is kind of part of my original question to you about... Was it just that people were worried about individuals or were people worried about this stuff 'getting out'?

Janey Yes.

Leah And I wonder whether part of it is 'will it actually leak out?' and how badly women have been treated for centuries.

Janey And we've just been stuffing pills in them.

Leah Absolutely.

Janey That's not right, but you know what I mean.

Leah Absolutely. Yeah, you know what will happen if we actually say 'this isn't mental illness, this'...

Janey This is a natural reaction to something that shouldn't have happened to you.

Leah And it's not just your unique experience, cos that's the difference... this actually happens to women all over the world and it's ... it's a crisis... it's an epidemic.

Leah You know it's something of that kind of proportion...and I think that's the bit that people are worried about leaking out.

Janey Yes, yes.

Leah Cos that's more than just opening a can of worms.

Janey And what it is, they get better and they start lobbying to the press ... speaking out about it... you can see the alarm definitely was there.

Leah Yeah, for sure Because... it's not just.... So there's an argument about medication versus therapy cos, you know... whether someone is empowered or not... but once you put women together and you have a collective voice, that's even more kinda scary. If you take that idea that actually you put a load of these women together... and they talk together and they all share their stories... what will that create?

Janey Where will it lead?

Leah Absolutely, and I think... you know, and it might not be at a kinda conscious level but I think it's definitely in the mix... so let's go back to the question of how... you know... did we feel that we (and it sound like we did) were part of a kinda social justice agenda... trying to make a better social world... and gain... I'm interested in that kinda recursive thing between having that agenda so trying to... sort of feed something into that stuff that's out there that we're trying to ... trying to change... and also how that impacts on us, yeah? So kind of... cos it's a big agenda, isn't it? And if we go back to... you know, you two are nurse trained... and I'm psycho-therapeutically trained ... so what we're taught is to help people... and we use all these measures to try and tell if someone's symptoms have decreased or whether someone's sense of wellbeing has improved ... and ... you know... it's often very individually focused... has this 'person' had a good experience of the service?... mmm... and that can feel... you know... that can feel pressure enough... have we had a good outcome with this person? But if our agenda is to make... make a better social world (sighs), that's big, isn't it?

Janey Yes, and it's even pushing it for a lot of mental health professionals within adult mental health to move beyond the individual to the family, that's a big enough shift, let alone from the family to the society.... Or community that they're in.... wow! And yet you're quite right cos otherwise all we're doing is picking people out of the river and giving them first aid without finding out how they fell in in the first place?

Lucy But then ...you know, the focus on recovery and stigma.

Janey Yes, that's true. That's true.

Lucy Everyone talks about it but what are you doing about it, eh?

Janey Cos it's such a big shift in ways of working, isn't it? And I suppose it would be unrealistic to think it would happen quickly, but...

Leah And yeah, it's... that kinda a shift.. it's a cultural shift but it's still individually tailored... so that's the difficulty, isn't it?... when you start talking about... umm... so it's really important to have those cultural shifts... but we're still talking about how that affects the 'patient'/the client/whatever we call them, it's still a person flashing on our computer screen that says 'what are you doing about me?' ...mmm... and I think it's hard when you're in a health setting how to be kinda... to feel that you have the freedom to do something at a community level... But I think undoubtedly we are all were working at that community level.

Janey Yes, and it's almost discouraged, isn't it? So, for example, you can't talk to the press without going through the communications officer and you're not really free to speak about issues relating to your world of work. It's... it's... yeah, we're all a bit muzzled, really.

Leah Absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

Some silence

Leah Yeah, I like that; that's a great quote.

Silence

Leah I think coming from the voluntary sector into statutory services, it... its' really quite stark... cos I do feel... when I started this course... I was amazed how stuck I felt... just in terms of talking about this and my supervisor said 'what are you trying to do?' and I just got myself so tongue tied and I just thought 'this isn't me, I don't do this' and I was just so stuck and all caught up in it... and ... you know... when I thought about it... it's cos I do feel so constrained... in terms of how much I talk about it... I feel constrained about how much I can say about the organisation, how much I can say about the island, how much I can say about my own... practice, cos everything feels quite owned, and, you know, you don't have that freedom.... Whereas working in the voluntary sector, I felt much more... I mean, obviously not breaking confidentiality, obviously... but I felt much freer to talk about themes about my practice, to talk about, you know, things that were interesting to me, mmmm, you, you just have the manoeuvrability to move and to think 'ah, I know somebody over there is doing some similar work; I'll go and talk to them and see what they are doing', whereas when you work for the health service, I think it's more 'so why are you talking to them?'.

Janey Yeah, yeah.

Leah They don't work in our sector, so even things like that... you know... sort of crossing over the bridges between the different divisions can be really quite tricky.

Janey Also I think... and I'm listening to myself now... and I'm talking like I'm at work.

Leah aAh yes, yeah!

Janey And I'm not talking ... I'm not free enough.

Leah Absolutely.

Janey To talk as I would at home about my work, you know.... I'm carefully thinking about the words I use (laughs) and no swearing...

Lucy It's interesting cos I always say to my friends 'if you saw me at work, you would be really shocked' ...mmm... the person I am at work ... is different to the person I am out...

Leah And that's natural, isn't it, to have personal and professional identities?

Janey Well, it's encouraged.

Leah Yes, rather than natural. You're quite right, it's constructed.

Lucy And it's encouraged kinda locally, isn't it, but also nationally by your governing bodies... you know, an example is if you're drunk... and being sick in public cos you're drunk... well, you could get a good telling off ,can't you, eh? Cos that's bringing the organisation into disrepute.

Janey But I remember when you were a student... every so often I used to...I used to... tell you off for something you said... and it makes me cringe now... I would say 'don't say that because it makes you sound like... it doesn't sound very professional', or something like that... and I was just, I don't know, (laughs) an agent of secondary socialisation... you used to say and that, that's right, it's just come back to me... after you said a lot of things you said... and I said 'you've got to stop saying that', and you have, actually.

All laugh

Leah Little bit of 'eh', though, eh?

All laugh

Leah Yeah, that's fascinating, isn't it? That.... Yeah... having that language you have to speak that somehow represents your professionalism and yet... we're also trying to meet with people and be with people... in a way that is not 'I am professional and you aren't' ... so we're trying to break down those barriers and yet we still feel constrained.

Janey Yes, yeah.

Leah Yes, it's really interesting.

Janey You could be seen as sailing close to the wind if you tried to do that more by your manager, you know? I'm sure it would be picked up.

Lucy And also by, you know... for example... like if someone else came into the groups with you.... Now, if you're both on the same kind of page with thinking about how to facilitate and about how you are as individuals ,that's okay... but then someone else comes in.... because you are conscious about how other people... other colleagues... perceive your practice, aren't you?

Leah Absolutely, yeah.

Lucy And that constrains you cos you're thinking: is that right?

Leah And even that... in that language... you know, we talk about how your 'practice' is perceived and a lot of the time it's not practice , its' conversation ... a lot of the time we're in a

group, so yes, there are elements of practice, there's elements of technique, there's elements of... uh... being influenced by a particular model.. whatever... but often we're just in conversation **WITH**, in the same way that we're in conversation WITH and we're adopting a certain way of speaking but... in particular, in this kind of scenario... but you know We're not in a pub... we're in a professional sort of construct... so there's a recorder there... and even though I've said 'don't worry, say anything you like'... we're still aware... so that's...

Lucy And that even more in the way of thinking kind of... oh, I've lost my train of thought now....

All laugh

Lucy Oh that's it, but then it's made not just about conversation because everything has to be evidence-based so every time, you know, like thinking about setting up the aspen group, you're looking at evidence base... like you said ... we had to think about the CBT model... and that's a restraint in itself cos you can't just set something up cos it's ... you know... supportive... there's got to be reasons why...

Leah I'm conscious of the time cos we started late and I've let it flow a bit, but you guys might have appointments.

Lucy I've got one at 5

Leah Shall we aim to finish in about five minutes; is that okay? Unless we feel that we have said enough.... But I'm interested in that idea... in almost the catch-22 of evidence base.... Umm... cos I think that is part of that idea of... you know, we talked about the recovery model... we've talked about this idea of making better social worlds which is a frame that I am using... and I think evidence base is part of that.... The ideas behind evidence base are about trying to make things better... you know, people don't set out to make things worse... and yet... things can become problematic and can feel restraining even though they weren't set out to be that... in that way... I'm thinking of, like, recovery colleges which I think theoretically are a great idea... and I can see real value in them... cos they're non-clinical But then... calling it a college, you're just introducing another kind of hierarchy.

Janey Can I just say, you're going from the frying pan into the fire and I know that cos I have moved from nursing practice into education and there's just as much baggage attached to all the hierarchies and the transference possibilities of being in a classroom situation as a teacher with students than there is (laughs) in the health service.

Leah If not more so, because it's so attached.

Janey To childhood.

Leah To our childhood experiences.

Janey Mmm, mmm.

Leah Yeah, so you call something a course and give someone a certificate for it and you think you're doing something good, but for some people that might have images of...

Lucy Like bullying or something.

Leah Or for some people, just never feeling good enough... 'how am I gonna be any good at this?' whereas... actually... for some people... like the lady we were debating with yesterday, being a patient is a really positive thing for her because, actually ... she talks about that like... if I had a broken leg you wouldn't try and be politically correct, you would just say 'your leg's

broken' and you're a patient of the service and we're here to help you.... So why do you dilly-dally.. and piss about with me because I have a mental health problem rather than a physical health one ... and so for her.. it's derogatory to use words like client and service user cos it means... it means we're already saying they are 'other than', that they need special language.

Janey Yes, it's true.

Lucy But then, for me, that's suggestive of something broken and we're going to fix it.

Janey Passivity to me... and medical model... so you do what you're told to get better... and we're the experts and you... yeah, just do what we tell you.

Lucy Client is more like... it makes me think of going to a beauty place and having a massage and I'm their client or... going to... the... umm... estate agent and I'm their client.

Janey More power... a client to me sounds like potentially they have more power.

Leah Like more rights?

Janey Yeah, but the point is... it doesn't really matter what it seems like to me ... what she is telling us is that everyone is different... how you manage that in a group? (laughs) You might just have to laugh about it and say patient, slash client, slash service user.

Leah (laughs) And that's exactly what we did.

Lucy I think she ended saying, didn't she at one point... client/ patient/service users/whatever you want to call it?

Leah I call it patient, you call it client (laughs) you say potato, I say patata..... definitely had that feel about it... we've probably gone off subject now...

Janey Have we answered your questions, do you think? I'm just trying to remember them.

Leah So yeah, it was 'what were we making together?' and it's interesting, we almost straight away got into those ideas of that political edge... How were we making it? We talked much more about things like structure, and how we were positioned in the group... What were we becoming? I think it was more tricky to tease out... but I think... we all talked about that sense of becoming other than other.... And then how do we make better social worlds? That was kinda part of that, really... being WITH... and that idea of being imperfect allies and I guess, you know... finding a political edge... which can be painful, I think... and, for me, that's where, that's where... that's my main motivation for doing this research and that's where I'm at... I still don't know how to... how to.. walk that political edge ... I kinda think I know how I can be a therapist ... and I kinda think I know how I can facilitate groups... but I don't really know how I can walk this political edge... I don't really know how I... umm... bang the drum, I suppose ... in a way that means I can still practice... it still means that I can do what I do... in that sense... to contribute in that way... so systemically speaking, I'm contributing to a better social work... but it feels like I could do so more directly... and I'm not sure how to make that leap, ummm.... And, for me, this is part of that... it's part of trying to join those things up a little bit.

Janey I know, I don't think I know either. On a small scale... a little bit... incremental small bits with individuals... or with small groups of individuals... but not... not how to deal with the bigger picture.

Lucy It seems like a massive step, doesn't it?

Janey Yes, and I, I remember when there was a GP here who sexually abused some of his patients... adult patients... vulnerable adult patients ... and umm... when ... and myself and a couple of female colleagues were instrumental in getting him going to the GMC (General Medical Council) and then umm... later on he... he reoffended... but I remember all the CRAP that we were faced with when we went with colleagues... we went to meet with them and say 'look, this man is dangerous, he's a perpetrator', AND he's persuaded the GMC that he's a victim, which is exactly what perpetrators do... so they all now feel sorry for him... and so they've given him just this really lenient sentence of just suspending him for a year... you are going along with that... writing in the paper, saying that he's having a sabbatical... when he's suspended... and you're minimising... and he's not taking responsibility for what he's done and he will do it again, UNLESS, you know, you seriously do some work to address this behaviour with him, and no-one is... and they just labelled us as 'raving feminists'.

Audible sigh

Lucy But is that a... is that... a local thing? Or...

Janey I think it could happen anywhere... I think it's less likely to happen in certain other cultures but I think it could happen anywhere easily.

Lucy And is that cos he's a doctor, and you're women, and he's a doctor?

Janey So, one of my colleagues was a doctor as well.

Lucy Oh gosh, so it's not even that hierarchy.

Janey One was a doctor, one was a social worker, one was me... and we kinda stuck together cos we knew we were gonna be facing hard times... so it's not easy... when you do have the courage to stick your head up above the parapet, you have to take a lot of flak.

Leah Yeah, and that's definitely not the first story I've heard... I've heard of psychiatrists abusing their patients and people having to kind of raise the alarm... I've heard of prison officers... you know, there's lots... and I think that question about whether that's particular to here? No, it isn't, BUT as an outsider, I think part of the story is that people come here, because they have a bad reputation elsewhere... and people come here to escape it... and they think that it won't get picked up and maybe there is a bit more fear here about kind of ringing the alarm bells because people are working and living in such a small community... it maybe feels a bit more risky to be the one that says 'hey, I don't think that person's practicing ethically' cos he might also be, you know, the vicar of your local church or....

Janey And its incredible, the blind eyes that were turned and also he had been using (health board) insurance for £60, or whatever it was for domiciliary rate, for going to see one of the women he was abusing... basically, he was being paid to have sex with her.

Leah Yeah.

Janey Paid by the taxpayer and that was never... it was like... no, don't talk about that.... Don't tell us about that.. we won't... you need to forget that.... I don't know if that would be the same again cos if you think about all the trouble that the organisation got in to in (another island) recently... but they have been at least courageous enough to investigate ... maybe the tide is changing... and maybe it's a better time to bang on a drum to us your words.

Leah Let's hope so.

Appendix 4

Five-step 'responsive temporally framed narrative inquiry' template for note taking and sense-making

Lucy and Janey

1- Initial emerging themes

Legacies, past beginnings to future beginnings
 Vision (future forming)
 Can of worms/fear of telling stories x 2
 Cover-ups and hidden stories/truths/constraints
 Society's wish to keep abuse silent
 Group as a societal level of intervention x 2
 Group think/dominant discourses – power of Voice
 Justice doing x 2
 Community intervention
 Shifts in language representing shift in thinking
 Political motivation of group
 Collective identity
 Group as agent of change
 Evolution
 Fear of others encroaching
 Boundaries x 2
 Freeing up – movement within group
 New insight/new stories/preferred futures
 Hierarchy and otherness – a changing story
 Aboutness to witness
 Them and us within the group – differentiating between abused and not abused, facilitator vs participant
 Imagery
 Self-belief developing
 Group challenging each other as part of change
 Trust vs shame x 2
 Movement between tenses
 Group vs individual change
 Shifting hierarchy
 Impact of group on the facilitator, personal responses
 Anger as a response
 Professional identities vs personal identities – shift in power
 Becoming as an idea of movement
 Sameness rather than difference
 Unity
 Solidarity x 2
 Legacies and personal stories as a potential to leak
 Disclosure

Individual focus of health services
 Cultural shift
 Social construction of professional identity
 Conversation as transformation
 Passivity and expertise: a story of power
 Inevitability of failure
 Future stories of hope and change – future tense

2- Emergent stories told/legacies

I asked myself at this point: what kind of story is this transcript telling? And my answer is that it is a story of action in the face of frustration/a gendered story of action and justice doing across three generations.

This is a story of both looking back over the long legacy of this community intervention alongside a story of performance (as described below). It is also, however, a story of action and finding voice, a story of joint action and understanding that is built on history, experience and relationship. Within which is a story of construction and language, especially in relation to victimhood, feminism etc. and the inevitability of failure when trying to 'right the wrongs' embedded within that. It tells a story of struggle that we all talk to in different ways. A story of tension between the process and content involved in group work and also in this thing we call research, trying to keep to agenda whilst also being part of the flow of conversation. There is also a story of historic change, change as a legacy told alongside stories of personal and collective development which are more present tense. There is also a story told (tentatively), which speaks to the local context, about a change of language of moving between a clinical language and a new non-diagnostic language which connects with the story of witness and aboutness and 'them and us', which Janey and Lucy talk about and embody in their practice. A story of reflection- that being with those who we may have previously seen as 'other' reflects back our ideas of self and in turn breaks down the barriers.

We tell and hear a story of connection across the generations.

We also hear a story of the shame of felt experience, the legacy of abuse told in our reflections of how the group saw US as different, less broken. More whole than them. This had to be deconstructed in the same way as we deconstructed the role of power and hierarchy in mental health services and in groups, forging new and collective identities.

We also tell a story about the group processes and how this mattered because it mattered to the women in the group, how it looked, the content, the timing etc. This matters to us because it mattered to the people in the group. This also tells a story of movement and learning – a movement between cognitive process and tacit knowledge; and a willingness to be exposed, to be more transparent as a human being and as a practitioner, but this is tempered by the context. I think we would have all gone further if we weren't also worried about 'going too far'. The talk of boundaries, I think, is part of this story of fear. You have to mention boundaries to show that you know they are

important if you are going to talk about transparency, in case professionalism is questioned. I think we would all have our untold stories of fear in relation to this, so we hold back. Or do we talk about boundaries as a justification of power? As a way to retain power even when we are talking about witness?

We begin to tell a story of a questioning of these constructions, but it is just the beginning. I think it is really interesting as I read the story of the metaphor of the camera zooming in and out, talking about group processes vs content, that as I read it I feel we move in and out and that we 'almost' go there, to the place where we really deconstruct what is going on, but just like the story, we pull back and put in perspective, we remember where we are! This is subtle fear in action. Janey tells a story of her own development from aboutness to witness, of recognising the 'them and us' in her thinking and I hear the story as a movement towards solidarity. It leads me in what I say next to almost disclose my own position of anger and injustice but I stop short. I move back to talking about 'others' and their experiences, rather than my own. I am not yet sure of the safety. Lucy moves this on to tell a story about gender, opening it out to wonder how a men's group (and talking about a men's group) might be different. I think this also tells a story of development, somewhere that Lucy may go in her practice, the next generation, future legacies.

We talk about local and global stories of 'leakage'. Women are afraid (as am I, in this transcript) to tell their own stories in case it suggests incompetence or something else, and we are afraid to talk in general about abuse in case it leaks out about how badly women have been treated for centuries. If we acknowledge it, that we might need to do something about it. It speaks of incompetence and failure of society.

Janey talks of alarm about this kind of leakage, when mentioning the press or just generally speaking out. I raise the idea of better social worlds and social justice. This is my language and my agenda, and I recognise that this is my own story that is leading the conversation on. Janey notices that this is a big shift, that it has been hard enough to get people to think beyond the individual to family without going to community, society. This feels big. It speaks to a story not yet told and not yet lived, though people are dipping their toes in the water as we are now. We move to a more present and more local (intimate) story – Janey steps back and says 'I am listening to myself now' and we start to think about HOW we are talking, the language we are using, the boundaries around how we do that. We are taking a meta-position. We open up a story of how we own our own positions, worries and fears. A story of professionalism and boundaries, the language we put around the behaviours we expect of each other in our shared work environment. We notice that this is constructed, but that we are part of that also. As I re-read this, I wonder, do men have these kinds of conversations about boundaries and professionalism, or do they take a different shape? How much is this a gendered story, a story of having to prove yourself, work harder, and better in order to be validated?

I look back and see this as a story of sense-making, of all the complexities that we have been working with/engaged with, a movement of looking back, noticing what is going on and looking to the future. It is a reflection of the research process that I am involved in.

There is also a strong story of relational ethics in this conversation that gets summed up as 'boundaries', which I experience as a limited and limiting kind of language.

3- Local stories/stories lived in relationship

As a local story, this is a present tense story that speaks to the knowledge we all share that this is an 'interview', and we play the part of being co-researchers. More evident at the beginning than at the end.

This is also a story of resistance; we are resisting oppression in this very conversation as well as talking about acts of resistance.

This is also a story of context – a shared context of mental health services and a shared understanding of the territory/geography of island life. It is an outsider-insider story, and we have all taken both positions at different stages. It is also a story of action and a story of finding our voice in an environment that is oppressive and constraining. In this regard, it is a story of survival, of how we all survived this kind of working environment.

This is also a story of hierarchy between us, with Janey as the 'wise woman' and Lucy as the 'new kid on the block'. We represent three generations of practitioners who feel compelled to work in this specific area of practice. We have all influenced each other, and have been influenced by the context in which we work. The way the conversation develops is perhaps more compliant to the idea of an interview than other conversations, as all of us would have been involved in clinical research, so we are perhaps more organised by that than by our existing relationships. We are also affected by our positions, and I think that I am a higher 'band' than Lucy, while Janey was Lucy's teacher and supervisor. I read some of the things that Lucy says as maybe seeking to please either Janey or myself. I think this speaks to subtle power both in seeing how that plays out and in me even thinking that Lucy could be seeking to please us. Why would she? Because we are higher up the hierarchy. How absurd. But I can both notice it and question it. I think, is that allowed? Can Lucy? This is tricky territory, and a story full of tension.

There is, however, a story of affirmation between the 'hierarchies', which speaks to the local relationship. Janey speaks of her embarrassment in how she 'taught' Lucy and they speak now as colleagues reflecting on that.

As I re-read this, I am also very aware of a hidden local story. Janey, at this time, was under enormous pressure at work, which we were unaware of. The story behind the scene was that she was being scapegoated for failings that *she* had actually raised. Her questioning of the practices led to her practice and her state of mind being questioned. It was suggested that she leave earlier than she had planned to (she was taking early retirement) and the story that developed was that her questioning of certain practices was about her negative state of mind, rather than a story of her competence.

Her bravery therefore, in telling me a story of previous cover ups, is even more pertinent.

I notice also that I follow the conventions of therapy as well as research by timekeeping, summing up, bringing people back to the question etc. I also notice that, although Janey lived this story, it does not reveal her inner story but speaks of competence and professionalism despite what she was going through. It tells a story of how (potentially) women are perhaps encouraged to hold back their personal experiences, because otherwise their competency might be questioned. I notice the parallel here for women over the centuries who have been hospitalised and incarcerated for expressing their distress.

4- Present response (post meditation)

After meditation, I notice a sticking in my throat, and I feel this as a residue of shame, the shame that I still embody and the fear of telling my truth. I still cannot say it. I notice that I hate the language of 'a can of worms'. I feel tired suddenly and feel like I could easily cry. Of course, I don't. I am at work as I do this.

My mind takes me to thinking about cognitive processes and the validity of research and evidence base and the lack of respect shown to lived experience and what this means; how what we think is given priority over what we feel. I am interested in the 'them and us' debate and I notice that there is energy in this and my body tingles.

I wonder what it would mean to be 'more' authentic. Is that possible? What does that mean? I am reminded of the poem 'enough' and of conversations I have had with my cohort about not feeling 'enough' – not academic enough to feel validated and comfortable in an academic setting but not working class enough to not sound patronising when I talk of oppression. I even wonder if my experiences of abuse/oppression is enough to be able to talk about abuse.

I wonder about my constant struggle when I am feeling in transition, in uncertain times, and which 'me' am I being now? Which *me* am I becoming?

5- Stories beyond and beneath

A story of hidden stories and truths...

When I re-read the transcript from this conversation, I am struck by all the things that are not said. I am aware of my hidden truths and I am aware of the story that emerged later of Janey: who, here, is holding a story of misuse of power and a story of 'being done to' by the system in which we all work. It is in parallel to all the things we are talking about, how women are pathologised for expressing themselves and saying something different to the 'group think' as Janey languages it.

I loved having this conversation with Janey and Lucy and really enjoyed listening back over it and re-reading it. However, I then realised that the more I read it the more I became aware of what was not being said rather than what was being said, and so it

reminds me of the feeling of living on an island and within a work culture that was restraining and limiting. The lack of physical space alongside the lack of thinking space and space to grow created a claustrophobic and narrow culture. Speaking out as we are here, as three women, mirrors what went on in the groups, but in both contexts the risks are also felt and the brakes are on in both scenarios.

I know now how much was going on for Janey, and I know that Lucy has her own stories that we have not touched on because it is not safe enough, even now. It holds us back. What a waste.

Even as I write now, I feel a lack of flow, a lack of energy which at first I mistook for boredom, as if I was tired of the material, but as I re-engage with it in a place where I now have some more space, I am more attuned to the concept that I am not bored; I am muzzled. I don't know how to say what I want to say which makes me feel like I don't know what I want to say, or that I don't have anything to say. This is a dangerous falsehood. I have plenty to say; I have just been silenced for too long.

Appendix 5



Institute of Applied Social Research

Application for Ethical Approval for a Research Project involving Primary Research

Name:	Leah Salter	
Contact email/phone:	leah.salter@study.beds.ac.uk /	
Date:	11.01.14	
Title of Proposal:	<i>Going On- Narratives of personal change and social action ensuing systemically informed groups for women</i>	
Anticipated Start Date:	of Project: 02.15	Of fieldwork: 03.15
Anticipated Duration of project:	2 Yrs.: 6 Months (approx.)	
Is the project to be externally funded? YES NO x		

UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENT PROPOSALS:

Supervisor Name:	Gail Simon
Award studied for:	Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice

What are the key aims or objectives of your research?

Aims

To develop understanding of some of the components of systemically oriented group work practice.

To begin to understand how the “embodied” self of the therapist inter/ intra-acts with narratives for womanhood, grouphood and community.

To relationally connect research and practice in a way that speaks to a development of practice as social action.

What is the key question your research will address?

Research question-

How might the exploration of shared narratives inform systemic practice, research and social action; and how might this loop back to personal and social responsibility for the systemic practitioner?

Who is your target group or sample?

- Systemic practitioners who facilitate systemically oriented groups, including myself
- Participants in systemically oriented groups, including -
- Women with mental health difficulties
- Mothers with mental health difficulties
- Mothers in the post natal phase (- 18 months post birth)
- Women who have experienced sexual abuse

These relate to 3 pilot groups that I wrote, developed, co-facilitated and was a member of.

- 1- A pilot group supporting women’s wellbeing (Wales)
- 2- A pilot group supporting post natal wellbeing for women (Wales)
- 3- A pilot group for women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, rape or sexual assault (British island community)

What data collection methods will you use?

Within a frame of narrative inquiry I will talk with and record three focus groups which I am calling “conversational inquiry groups” consisting of women in three separate group (15-20 participants overall) who have previously attended systemically oriented community groups that I have facilitated in two practice contexts (Wales and a British island community). The women will come back together within the groups that they originally attended.

I will also record three conversations with co-facilitators, colleagues and members of a systemic community of practice (5 participants) women group facilitators who I have worked with in the groups above. Also included will be three detailed case studies or “in-depth dialogues” of three of the women from the collaborative inquiry groups (3 participants).

All the conversations will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Also available in each of the interviews will be material which will include, pens, colouring pens, paper, post-it notes in case some people choose to write or draw some contributions. Consent attends to verbal and written material and any potential art work/ photos.

Answer the following questions by checking 'yes' or 'no' and supplying any additional information as required

Does the study involve children (anyone under 18 years), vulnerable participants or those who are unable to give informed consent? *[Please consult the notes on researching with children and young people and the list of those who may be considered 'vulnerable' at the end of this form before completing]*

YES

x

NO

No children will be involved. Some of the adults who will take part in this inquiry will have mental health diagnoses, and be receiving treatment such as psychotherapy and/ or therapeutic group support. This does not necessarily mean that they would identify with ideas of vulnerability, or consider themselves to be vulnerable. They will not be asked to take part if they are currently unwell or unable to give informed consent, based on my own clinical judgment (as a UKCP registered Psychotherapist with 6 years post qualifying experience in working in adult mental health), my colleagues judgements (mental health professionals) and their own view. Those that do agree to take part will be assured of confidentiality, as per the participant letters. No identifying information will be used. They will have access to psychotherapeutic support via the service that I currently work in, in the case of the women who have experienced sexual abuse. If appropriate the women in Wales can be re-referred to the project they were part of, in order to access group support or they will be referred to other local services if appropriate. They will be assured that their treatment will not be effected if they decide not to take part in the inquiry. As a retrospective inquiry the women will not be currently involved in the groups about which they will be talking. Full written and verbal explanation will be given as per the information sheet.

If YES: Have/will researchers been DBS checked? *(obligatory)*

YES x

No

From whom will consent be sought and how is consent to be given? *(it is anticipated that written consent will be sought in most circumstances)*

From women who have attended women only groups.

From systemic and/or group work practitioners.

This inquiry would be seen as "insider" research or practice inquiry; as such I have already met with all of the women I will be talking with in this inquiry, and we will have an established relationship with many of them. They will not be currently attending groups that I facilitate as this is a retrospective inquiry.

Is participation voluntary?

YES x

NO

Will it be necessary for participants to be involved without consent? (e.g. covert observation in public places)

YES **NO** **x**

Will the study make use of gatekeeper(s) to access participants?

YES **x** **NO**

I will talk with my colleagues from the project I previously worked with in Wales as a means to communicate with previous group members as I no longer have access to their personal information. My colleague will make contact with them, using the participant information sheet and letter and then act as a contact point if required.

Will the study include participants or involve accessing information or case files pertaining to those who are part of your client group, case load or with whom you are working?

YES **NO** **x**

Will the study be exploring 'sensitive' topics? *[Please consult the list of what may constitute a 'sensitive' topic given at the end of this form]*

YES **x** **NO**

The main focus of the inquiry is the context of group work and "coming together" in women only groups, as well as enquiring as to how people and communities have gone on after the group. However given the nature of the groups this is also likely to include discussion about mental health and experiences of abuse and trauma. No identifying information will be used and participants will be assured that taking part or not will not affect their treatment or relationship to the organisation they are involved in. It is unlikely that there will be "new" disclosures in relation to abuse as I have previously worked with all the women in the group and supported them through that phase of their "journey". However I am aware of the local and organisational framework for reporting such abuse and would be able to help the women to access what they need in terms of support should that be required.

Will the research investigate involvement in any illegal activity?

YES **NO** **x**

Will any incentives or rewards be offered for participation?

YES **NO** **x**

Is the research likely to cause any distress to participants?

YES **NO** **x**

But if any distress was experienced then individuals will be offered or signposted to appropriate therapeutic support.

Will arrangements be made to support participants after their involvement in fieldwork if necessary?

YES **x**

NO

Women in the island community will have access to psychotherapeutic support via the service that I currently work in. They will have the option of seeing me if I have previously been their therapist, or they can see somebody else if that is their preference.

If appropriate the women in Wales can be re-referred to the project they were part of, in order to access group support or they can be referred to other local services if appropriate.

Will the research involve intrusive interventions? (e.g. provision of drugs to participants, hypnosis, physical exercise, blood or tissue sampling)

YES

NO **x**

Will the research involve any participants from the NHS (patients or staff)

YES

NO **x**

Will the study involve clients or workers of a Local Authority?

YES **x**

NO

Will ethical approval for the project be sought from any other source?

YES **x**

NO

I will be seeking ethical approval from my current employer. I have previously spoken with the ethics committee and they are aware that this research is awaiting ethical approval through the university.

If your research involves fieldwork with human subjects provide details of how you will gain informed consent?

The women in the island community will be directly contacted by me, as we have established relationships. They will be given an information sheet and accompanying consent form to fill out if they decide to take part in the inquiry. I will also verbally explain the choices they have in taking part, such as protecting anonymity, withdrawal of consent etc.

The women in Wales will be contacted via the organisation that set up the group, then the information letters and consent form will be sent to them. Consent will be explained to them via letter and verbally through my previous colleagues who will make contact with them on my behalf.

How you will ensure confidentiality and deal with disclosures of harm or illegal activity?

Confidentiality will be explained as per the letters, measures to protect confidentiality include anonymising names and removing any identifiable information. Recorded conversations will be destroyed after the thesis is written up (March 2017). Transcriptions and audio recordings will be kept in a locked cabinet and electronic data will be destroyed after the research.

Disclosures will be managed in line with my professional responsibility and in line with UKCP code of conduct. Any information that potentially compromises safety will be reported to the

relevant authority. Any steps taken will be explained to the participant. I am aware of procedures in place within the two organisations and their locality procedures should there be cause for concern in relation to child or adult safety. However I do not anticipate this will happen.

How you will inform participants about the purpose of the research and dissemination of findings, who will have access to the data?

The information sheet includes basic detail about the research. Within the agreement form is a question asking if people would like to have a copy of the research. This will be followed up in line with their choice. Participants can therefore have access to the completed (anonymised) research once completed. As the intent is for the research to be published there will also be a wider audience consisting (I would envisage) of systemic practitioners, family therapists, community workers, group facilitators and potentially wider.

What steps will be taken to ensure the safety of researchers and participants?

The venue will be chosen with health, safety and accessibility in mind. All the participants have previously been “assessed” for potential risk as they have attended group work previously with myself as a facilitator. None of the women in the groups, or the professionals I will be speaking with have a history of aggression or posed any threat to others when I previously worked with them. However I will ensure that I have a mobile phone with me, will advise my colleagues where I am and when I am likely to return, and ensure that there is another professional within the building we use to avoid lone working issues. Risk assessments can be updated if appropriate.

What mechanisms you will employ to enable participants to withdraw from the research if they should wish to do so. It may in some circumstances be appropriate to impose time limitations on the right to withdraw, but in that event, you should indicate what considerations you have taken into account when determining those limits.

An excerpt from the participant information sheet-

“Taking part in the inquiry is your decision. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. You may also stop talking at any time or decide not to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering. Participation, non-participation or withdrawal will not affect your relationship to the organisation that set up the group in any way, and it will not affect our relationship. If you take part in the conversation but then at a later date decide that you do not want your story/ words to be included in what I write then you can withdraw at any point between the date of the conversation and before the end of October 2015 when I will begin writing up the research.”

The limit is based on when I intend to complete the “fieldwork” part of my research. After this date it would be difficult to remove data from the research.

How you will store the data and what you will do with it on completion of the project?

An excerpt from the information sheet-

“The complete content of our conversations will only be reviewed by me and the supervisors of the research. I will listen to our conversations, write down what has been said, and then look at themes that have been talked about. The recording will then be destroyed after March 2017. The recording and transcript of what has been said will be kept in a locked cabinet. Some of the content of what was said will be included in the write up of my research, which may include some quotes from you. These will be anonymised so you cannot be identified by people reading the research.”

As stated all this information will be stored in line with data protection guidance and will be destroyed after the research is completed.

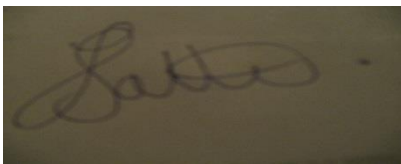
Summary-

Participants/ co-researchers will be assured of confidentiality verbally and in writing. I will assure that no names are used (unless in the case of the practice inquiry- conversations with my colleagues- that they choose to use their names to be identified so that they can be referenced). Participants from groups that I have facilitated will have access to psychotherapeutic support either within the organisation they are already involved in, or via referral to specialist or community services in their area (if appropriate). Participants will be assured that their treatment will not be affected if they decide not to take part in the inquiry. Full written and verbal explanation will be given about this and about their right to withdraw consent within a reasonable timeframe.

I will be recording conversations with the co-researchers and then listening to those recordings. These recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Recordings will be destroyed after the project is complete.

Applicant declaration

I understand that I cannot begin any fieldwork until the application referred to in this form has been approved by all relevant parties. I agree to carry out the research in the manner specified. If I make any changes to the approved method I will seek further ethical approval for any changes



Signed (Applicant): Leah Salter Date: 11.01.2015

Appendix 6

Guidelines for submission (Progression point 2) taken from the PDSP handbook

General

The submission should demonstrate:

- Sufficient coherence between the ethics submission and the content in this submission.
- Substantial, critical understanding and knowledge of the literature relevant to i) the focus of their inquiry, ii) the approaches to research under discussion, iii) systemic social constructionist theory.
- Substantial, critical and reflexive discussion of the methodological framework, accounting for the choice of approaches, limitations and advantages of the approaches.
- The research topic is illustrated with examples from professional practice.
- Discussion about what counts as knowledge, evidence or relevant to the subject.
- How literature and other material is being sourced.
- The submission is beginning to identify that which is original or novel in the inquiry and critically situates it in relevant and comparative national and international literature, research material and practice communities.
- Examples of useful and innovative elaborations of theory for systemic practice and systemic practice research.
- Signs of the research making a substantive contribution to the field of systemic practice and systemic inquiry, to members of the public, other professionals, communities or organisations.
- Critical understanding of the strengths and limitations of both the means of capturing or creating research material and of the means of analysing or reflecting on the material and its consequences for the researcher and others.
- Plans and the timeline for completing the research study and a satisfactory thesis should be viable within resource constraints.

Reflexivity

- Sophisticated examples of self and relational reflexivity.
- An honest, transparent and reflexive account about the selection of material and the candidate's own interpretation or use of the material.
- Critical and reflexive thinking about the literature incorporated in the texts and how it might apply across, for example, different socio-economic, cultural contexts or areas of life experience, identity or professional practice.
- Transformation in the researcher's thinking and practice.

- The reader is offered detail about the presence of the researcher including inner and outer dialogue, thoughts in progress, noticings, feelings, the concrete and the transient.
- Critical and reflexive appraisal of the advantages and disadvantages of being a practitioner-researcher.

Ethics

- Researchers speak in the first person and from within lived experience and practice relationships.
- The research has a social justice objective, addressing real concerns for people and the systems in which they live, showing how the practices in the inquiry improve the lives of others.
- Rich consideration of power relations, differences in lived experience, belonging and identity and how these matters play out in both the area of professional practice inquiry and research relationships.
- Reflexive discussion and appreciation of ethical issues raised by the research study spanning the entire lifespan of the research study from initial planning, including connection to other work in the field, throughout creating or collecting material and reflection and sense-making, during preparation and presentation of the thesis, reports to stakeholders and wider publication or dissemination. Clear descriptions of measures designed to mitigate ethical concerns and comply with research governance requirements.
- Confirmation that research ethics screening was completed before any data collection occurred and, if Research Ethics Committee (REC) approval was required, confirmation that this was obtained from the appropriate REC before any data collection occurred.

Aesthetics

- The presentation of the submission has aesthetic merit.
- The candidate is integrating the literature well in their chosen format.
- The submission is written in a manner which provides readers of the thesis with a reflexive space to make their own meaning alongside the writer's own reflections.
- That the candidate is finding a style of writing that works for them, for the reader and for the subject.
- The research demonstrates theoretical and structural irreverence, independent thought, critical thinking, a balance of imagination and rigour.

